



# 1 & 2 Thessalonians Through the Centuries

Blackwell  
Bible  
Commentaries

Anthony C. Thiselton

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“I can think of no person better qualified to write a reception-history commentary than Anthony Thiselton, because he knows what reception history means and how it plays out in interpretation. This commentary is a treasure trove of exegetical and theological insights gleaned from the vast and interesting array of those who not only have interpreted these important letters to the Thessalonians but have responded in prose and poetry to their major themes and ideas.”

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New Testament, McMaster Divinity College,  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada*

“With an uncanny grasp of the ‘afterlife’ of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Anthony Thiselton demonstrates why it is crucial that we understand that we aren’t the first people to encounter these Pauline letters. For some it might have been enough simply to document centuries of encounter with these New Testament texts, but Thiselton takes us further, showing where the history of influence has been relatively stable and also where that history provokes our fresh reflection. Not surprisingly, with this foray into the emerging area of reception history, Anthony Thiselton has set a high bar for those who will follow.”

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“This superb commentary deals with some of the earliest Christian writing we possess. The reception history exemplified here considers not simply how different readers at different times interpreted these important texts but the whole manner in which they have shaped the history and direction of the church and its thinking. This sheds immense light not only on the suppositions that we naturally bring to the themes of these texts but how we should and should not interpret Paul. All this is undertaken not only with the scholarly depth that one would expect from one of our foremost Biblical and hermeneutical scholars of our time but also with profound insight into the theological issues at stake. Of interest equally to church historians, Biblical scholars, theologians and ministers alike, it is a key resource for all who would endeavour to understand how Paul has been read and should be read. Lucid in style, this volume is not only immensely scholarly, it is also an accessible and extremely enjoyable read!”

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**Anthony C. Thiselton**

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Series Editors' Preface

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries series, the first to be devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible, is based on the premise that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant. The series emphasizes the influence of the Bible on literature, art, music, and film, its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, and its impact on social and political developments. Drawing on work in a variety of disciplines, it is designed to provide a convenient and scholarly means of access to material until now hard to find, and a much-needed resource for all those interested in the influence of the Bible on western culture.

Until quite recently this whole dimension was for the most part neglected by biblical scholars. The goal of a commentary was primarily if not exclusively to get behind the centuries of accumulated Christian and Jewish tradition to one single meaning, normally identified with the author's original intention.

The most important and distinctive feature of the Blackwell Commentaries is that they will present readers with many different interpretations of each text, in such a way as to heighten their awareness of what a text, especially a sacred text, can mean and what it can do, what it has meant and what it has done, in the many contexts in which it operates.

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries will consider patristic, rabbinic (where relevant), and medieval exegesis as well as insights from various types of modern criticism, acquainting readers with a wide variety of interpretative techniques. As part of the history of interpretation, questions of source, date, authorship, and other historical-critical and archaeological issues will be discussed, but since these are covered extensively in existing commentaries, such references will be brief, serving to point readers in the direction of readily accessible literature where they can be followed up.

Original to this series is the consideration of the reception history of specific biblical books arranged in commentary format. The chapter-by-chapter arrangement ensures that the biblical text is always central to the discussion. Given the wide influence of the Bible and the richly varied appropriation of each biblical book, it is a difficult question which interpretations to include. While each volume will have its own distinctive point of view, the guiding principle for the series as a whole is that readers should be given a representative sampling of material from different ages, with emphasis on interpretations that have been especially influential or historically significant. Though commentators will have their preferences among the different interpretations, the material will be presented in such a way that readers can make up their own minds on the value, morality, and validity of particular interpretations.

The series encourages readers to consider how the biblical text has been interpreted down the ages and seeks to open their eyes to different uses of the Bible in contemporary culture. The aim is to write a series of scholarly commentaries that draw on all the insights of modern research to illustrate the rich interpretative potential of each biblical book.

*John Sawyer*  
*Christopher Rowland*  
*Judith Kovacs*  
*David M. Gunn*

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# Abbreviations

- ANF      The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956–62 [1885–96].
- CCSL      Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
- FC      Fathers of the Church
- LCC      Library of Christian Classics, vols. 1–26, gen. eds. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen. London: SCM, 1953–69. Vols. 20 and 25 published Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960.

- NPNF1 A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 1st series, ed. Philip Schaff. 14 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1886–9.
- NPNF2 A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 14 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- PG Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Graeca, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne. Paris: Garnier, 1857–66. (Popularly known as *Patrologia Graeca*.)
- PL Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne. Paris: Garnier, 1844–65. (Popularly known as *Patrologia Latina*.)

# Introduction

## **The Aims of Reception History**

*The aim of this commentary*

The Preface to the series explains that reception history shows not only how people have interpreted a text (in this case 1 and 2 Thessalonians), but also how the text (Thessalonians) has influenced readers. The history of reception therefore examines interpretation of the two epistles in a number of historical periods or “through the centuries.” But it also shows how writers respond under the influence of the text. It becomes an interdisciplinary study, because the text is “received” not only by commentators and Christian theologians, but also by

those known for their literary work, including poetry, hymns, philosophy, music, and art. The writer who in effect founded reception history, Hans Robert Jauss, describes it as socially formative. It becomes a resource for cultural study. The Bible shapes ideas and practices, yet these ideas and practices shape how the Bible is interpreted, and its role in practical life.

The study thus provides multiple perspectives on the text. It is like being given a stereoscopic vision, or what Mikhail Bakhtin called a “polyphonic” vision of the text. Since modern biblical studies tends to concentrate only on the relatively recent conclusions of biblical criticism, this commentary, like others in the series, offers a distinctive resource for studying 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Even the vast commentary of 754 pages by Beda Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (1956), concentrates on exegesis or interpretation, while it has virtually nothing on reception history, except passing references to interpreters of earlier years. This applies even more to more recent standard commentaries, for example, those by Ernest Best (1972), F. F. Bruce (1982), Abraham J. Malherbe (2000), and others. Even Ben Witherington (2006), who takes a new approach, restricts much of his attention to rhetorical criticism, as well as to modern interpretation. There is relatively little engagement with precritical interpretation.

### *The founder of reception history: Hans Robert Jauss*

The main founder of reception history was Hans Robert Jauss (1921–97). In 1944 he began studies in Prague, and in 1948 at Heidelberg. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) had a special influence on his thought. He specialized in the romance literature of the Middle Ages. In 1966 Jauss shared in founding the University of Constance as a center of interdisciplinary research, which included a professorial research team of five. He gave his inaugural lecture on literary history in 1967, which largely founded the principles of reception history. It is available in his programmatic book, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982). Influences on this include: (1) Hans-Georg Gadamer, his teacher at Heidelberg, on the history of *effects* (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), or (as Luz suggests) the history of *influences*; (2) reader-response theory in Wolfgang Iser and others, who focus attention on the *active* role of readers in making the potential of a text actual (see Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 516–57); and (3) the theory of paradigm change, which suggests a switch between the dominant models that influence a discipline, but without fully discarding previous models. He also considers many other writers on literature, including Roman Ingarden, and Paul Ricoeur. (For a convenient summary, see Holub, *Reception Theory*, 1–52; Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics*; Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 316–25.)

The heart of Jauss's essay concerns the concept of "horizon of expectation." Many use the concept of "horizon" for interpretation in hermeneutics, as the boundary which limits what lies within the view of an interpreter. But it is crucial that "horizons" may *move and expand*, as the *interpreter* moves. This differs often from "presuppositions." The text becomes active when the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter engage with each other (see Thiselton, *Two Horizons*). But a text may not always "say" what a group of readers *expects*. Jauss speaks of "a change of horizons," for "at the historical moment of its appearance" a work or text "satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or refutes the expectations of its first audience" (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 25). He observes: "The reconstruction of the horizon of expectations in the face of which a work was created and received in the past enables one ... to pose questions that the text gave an answer to, and thereby to discover how the contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work" (28). From the viewpoint of this series of commentaries, the next sentence is critical: "It brings to view the ... difference between the former and current understanding of a work."

In 1 and 2 Thessalonians differences of horizon, situation, and perspective, give us a broader depth, or a new perspective on the text, which looks for continuity and discontinuity in historical readers. Jauss opposes "historical objectivism," or merely "causal" or value-neutral production of the work (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 20). He opposes positivism. Earlier texts predispose the reader to approach a text with a prior horizon of expectation, but this may become "corrected, altered, or even just reproduced" (23). Overall, there may be, through a historical period, a "historical unfolding of understanding," the discovery of a cumulative tradition (32). We wait to see whether or not "innovation, surprise, surpassing, rearrangement, alienation" (35) will disrupt tradition and continuity. In everyday life certain ways of reading become routinized, automatic, and familiar. The landscape becomes flattened. Art and *poēsis* (in the sense intended by Aristotle) seek to disrupt what is known as overfamiliarization. We see the familiar from a fresh angle, or in a new way. In modern painting this is often a standard move.

Finally, Jauss takes up "the Logic of Question and Answer" from Gadamer and Collingwood. For example, what *questions* we ask of the work or the text differs according to whether we are engaged in (1) a first reading, or (2) what Jauss calls "a retrospectively interpretative reading," or (3) a "historical reading that begins with ... reconstruction" (139). A poetic text will enable us initially to perceive something, but the process of exploring meaning may remain "still left open" (141). In this respect it is like interpreting a musical score. Jauss explores this further in his *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1982).

*Jauss and 1 and 2 Thessalonians*

One of Jauss's key points concerns tension between the reception of a text in a given period of the history of reception and its widespread reception today. Where this tension is sharp, it may challenge the reader to rethink his or her expectations. Jauss often calls this *provocation*. Probably the most striking example of such tension can be seen in the apocalyptic flavor of 2 Thessalonians, and even more decisively in respective attitudes to Paul's language about the wrath of God, or about hell and punishment in 1 and 2 Thessalonians (see 1 Thess. 2:16; 4:15–16; 5:3, 9; 2 Thess. 1:5–9; 2:10–11). For example, on 1 Thess. 2: 15, Chrysostom asserts that the wrath of God is near, "predetermined and predicted" (*Homily 3*; NPNF1 13.334). On 1 Thess. 4:16 he declares: "Might one say, 'God is full of love,' hence this is only a threat? These things are indeed true ... These things will happen" (*Homily 8.357*). He compares the illusory skepticism of those to whom Noah preached, and cites the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. He concludes, "I say not these things to frighten you" (*Homily 8.359*) but as salutary medicine. In *Homily 2* on 2 Thessalonians 1 (NPNF1 13.382) he declares: "If we always think of hell, we shall not soon fall into it." He comments, "Dost thou fear the offensiveness of such words? Hast thou, if thou art silent, extinguished hell? ... Let it be continually spoken of, that thou mayest never fall into it. It is not possible that a soul anxious about hell should readily sin" (383).

Many more quotations to this effect come from Chrysostom, as feature below. But this is not confined to Chrysostom's era. Irenaeus comments, "In both Testaments there is the same righteousness of God [displayed], when God takes vengeance ... The fire is eternal, and the wrath of God shall be revealed from heaven." But, he adds, "They [Gnostics] keep silence with regard to his judgement" (see Matt. 26:24). Irenaeus especially has in mind the Gnostic contrast between an allegedly wrathful Creator God of the Old Testament, and an allegedly loving and mild God of the New Testament (*Against Heresies* 4.28.1–2; ANF 1.501). Tertullian writes that "Vengeance" and "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord" are explicit predictions of Paul (vv. 8–9; *Against Marcion* 5.6; ANF 3.463). Origen alludes to the wrath of God in the golden calf narrative (Exod. 32:11; *On Prayer* 10.3); of God's judgment being "in the right" in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exod. 9:27; *On Prayer* 28.16); and of God's judgments as "unsearchable" in Rom. 11:33 (*On First Principles* 4.3.14). Basil the Great (c. 330–379) reminds his readers to keep before them "that day and that hour ... the tribunal where no excuses will prevail" (Letter 174; NPNF2 8.220).

This is not even confined to the patristic era. In the medieval era, we shall consider *Judgement II* (perhaps from Bede), *The Exeter Book*, Haimo, Thietland,

and others. In the Reformation era, Calvin from the Protestant side, and Estius from the Catholic, adopt the same stance. Arminius, Owen, Thomas Vincent, and Matthew Poole provide further examples. Vincent writes of the loss of “that unspeakable happiness of heaven . . . You will be ready to tear yourselves to pieces for madness and vexation.” Consider “the soreness and intolerableness of it” (*Fire and Brimstone*, 1). In the eighteenth century we may note Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and John Newton; and in the nineteenth century James Denney stands in this tradition. In the First Epistle this particular source of “provocation” or tension arises from the use of standard apocalyptic symbolism to denote the events of the end times (1 Thess. 4:15–17; 5:2–3; 2 Thess. 1:7, 10; 2:4–12). Are these events merely the stage-setting of a pre-Enlightenment culture, or are they to be taken more seriously? Cyril of Jerusalem urges: “Let us wait and look for the Lord’s coming upon the clouds of heaven. Then shall angels’ trumpets sound; . . . The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel and with the trump of God” (1 Thess. 4:16–17; Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 15.20; NPNF2 7.110). In due course we shall compare similar views in Gregory of Nyssa and others in the patristic, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation traditions.

It is not only an emphasis on the last judgment that may clash with modern expectations. The notion of “prophecy,” as this is understood by various generations of readers (1 Thess. 5:19) does not accord with a widespread and popular view today. Many today regard this in either of two ways which partly diverge from mainline tradition. Some regard prophecy primarily as predictions of the future; others adopt the classical Pentecostal sense of viewing prophecy as a spontaneous, staccato-like, pronouncement made often from within a congregation. Thomas Gillespie and others argue that, by contrast, it often constitutes pastoral, applied *preaching* which conveys the *gospel*. This view can be found “throughout the centuries” as the normal interpretation among the church fathers, Aquinas, Calvin, John Wesley, James Denney, and many others. Ambrosiaster and Augustine see “prophecy” as explanatory exposition of scripture (Augustine, *On the Psalms* 76.4; NPNF1 8.361). Thomas Aquinas asserts that “prophesying” (1 Thess. 5:19) “may be understood as divine doctrine . . . Those who explain doctrine are called prophets . . . ‘Do not despise preachers’” (*Commentary*, 52). Calvin declares, “Prophecy means the art of interpreting scripture” (60). Estius insists that it does not mean “private interpretation” (*Commentarius*, 2.592). Matthew Henry remarks, “By prophesyings here we understand the preaching of the word, the interpreting and applying of the scriptures” (*Concise Commentary* on 1 Thess. 5:19–20). John Wesley writes, “Prophecyings, that is preaching” (*Notes*, 694). James Denney says of the prophet, “He was a Christian preacher” (*Thessalonians*, 239). Such an

army of witnesses might suggest that further thought is needed, before we readily endorse either of these two more popular views of what 1 Thess. 5:19 and similar passages mean about “prophecy.”

### *Other exponents of reception history*

Brevard S. Childs (1923–2002) was one of the first, if not the first, to introduce a preliminary version of reception history of Old Testament passages in his *Exodus: A Commentary* (1974). At the level of theory this commentary cannot claim the sophistication of Jauss or of Ulrich Luz, to whom we shall refer, but it did lay preliminary foundations or groundwork for later reception history.

Ulrich Luz (b. 1938), professor, and emeritus professor in the University of Bern, has written on various New Testament issues, but especially on Matthew. The first of his four-volume commentary appeared in German in 1985. The English translation is available in three volumes: *Matthew 1–7* (1989), *Matthew 8–20* (2001), and *Matthew 21–28* (2005). He also produced *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects* (1994). He speaks not primarily of “the history of effects,” but of the “history of influences” (*Matthew 1–7*, 95). Luz comments, “I understand the history, reception, and actualising of a text in media other than the commentary, thus, e.g. in sermons, in canonical law, hymnody, art, and in the actions and sufferings of the church” (95). The history of interpretation and the history of influence are related to each other “*like two concentric circles*, so that ‘history of influence’ is inclusive of ‘history of interpretation’” (95, my italics). The history of influences constitutes the embracing outer circle, which frames the inner one of history of interpretation. The history of *effects* in reception history must not be identified with mere history of *interpretation*, a component of it. The former presupposes the latter.

Luz also urges that a selection of passages and periods is unavoidable. But he declares that interpretations make or have made “an impact” on Protestant and Catholic churches, and their confessional traditions. The *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar*, of which Luz’s *Matthew* is part, partly bears witness to this, and has an ecumenical purpose. But, unlike the Blackwell commentaries, Luz tends to restrict his attention to the traditions of the Christian church. Ulrich Wilckens on Romans and Wolfgang Schrage on 1 Corinthians provide further examples of his approach in this series. Luz also sees historical-critical study as a good means for *distancing* the interpreter from the text, and for making us aware of our preliminary understanding. Reception history helps us to understand “*how each interpreter is influenced by texts*” (*Matthew 1–7*, 97). Some of Luz’s work may be controversial. He claims, for example, that “Biblical texts do not have a simple fixed meaning” (*Matthew in History*, 19). But this depends on *what kind*

of biblical text we are reading. Umberto Eco (*Role of the Reader*, 8) sharply and rightly distinguishes between “open” (or literary) and “closed” (or transmissive) texts, following J. Lotman. Some biblical texts are by their nature “closed” or transmissive, passing on or transmitting a message or *kerygma* of the apostolic church, or sometimes such “fixed” historical events as the crucifixion of Christ. But this is not the case with “open” or poetic texts. These often suggest a polyvalent meaning (see Thiselton, *Can the Bible Mean Whatever We Want It to Mean?*).

## **The Situation and Substance of 1 Thessalonians**

One of the most intriguing and inspiring factors about 1 Thessalonians is that it probably constitutes the earliest and oldest Christian writing that we possess. It is older than any other book of the New Testament, and may be dated to AD 50, less than 20 years after the death of Jesus Christ.

A second key factor arises from the importance and geographical situation of Thessalonica. Thessalonica was the capital city of Macedonia, which had become a Roman province in 148 BC. On the so-called second missionary journey of Paul the apostle, Paul made the decisive breakthrough from the cities of Asia Minor to those of northern Greece, or Macedonia. The fuller record of Acts 16:6–18:5 agree very closely with autobiographical reflections in 1 Thessalonians, even if it was written much later. Timothy joined Paul and Silas (or Silvanus), and the three at first intended to remain in Asia Minor. According to Acts, however, God guided them to Troas, on the edge of the Aegean Sea, where on the other side of a narrow strip of sea lay Greece. Paul dreamed that “a man of Macedonia” pleaded with him to cross the sea to Europe. At this point the “we” passages in Acts, written in the first person plural, lead many to think that the “man of Macedonia” was perhaps Luke himself.

### *The situation according to Acts and 1 Thessalonians*

Paul and his co-workers crossed over the sea to Neapolis and 10 miles further to the Roman colony of Philippi. There they made several converts, who became the nucleus of a small church (Acts 16:11–15). Lydia and her household were baptized, and Paul stayed in her home. According to the Acts narrative, trouble was provoked by Paul’s encounter with a “psychic” slave girl. Paul performed an exorcism, and the owners who were making money from her psychic performances had Paul and Silas arrested and put in prison (Acts 16:16–24). After an earthquake and its consequences had delivered them from prison, the

magistrates let them go the next morning, without even an apology for ill-treating Roman citizens (Acts 16:25–40). They returned to Lydia’s home, and gave pastoral encouragement to the new church.

Paul and his co-workers left Philippi, and arrived in Thessalonica. They used the synagogue as their base at first, “arguing [Greek, *dielexato*] from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead” (Acts 17:1–3). They continued doing this for three sabbaths. Luke, or the author of Acts, notes that “some were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas ... but the Jews became jealous ... and set the city in an uproar” (17:4–5). Those who believed Paul included many “God-fearers,” that is Greeks or Hellenists who had attempted synagogue worship in their quest for truth and a God-fearing life. Meanwhile the rowdy mob, failing to find Paul and Silas, attacked the house of Jason, Paul’s host, and dragged him before the city magistrates. According to Acts, they charged the Christians with “acting contrary to the decrees of the Emperor, and saying that there is another king named Jesus” and of “turning the world upside down” (17:6–8). In view of the imperial cult and of Thessalonica’s indebtedness to Rome for many of its privileges, this charge has great historical likelihood. The magistrates took bail from Jason, Paul, and his co-workers, and let them go. The church then sent Paul and Silas to Berea for their safety (17:9–10). Research on Thessalonica has shown how important to Thessalonica the favor of Rome was, so Paul would have appeared to challenge the established order, to a larger extent than otherwise.

Paul’s account in 1 Thessalonians confirms that the converts came to genuine faith in spite of persecution (1 Thess. 1:6). In their faith, love, steadfastness, and hard work, they become model Christians, following Paul’s own example (1 Thess. 1:5–8). They turned from their former Gentile life (v. 9), and awaited Christ’s coming (v. 10). Paul recalls that his coming to Thessalonica was “not in vain” (2:1). He reaffirms his honest motivation in coming to them (2:3–8). Like them, he did not shun hard work (2:9), while he exercised care for them (2:11–12). Paul’s work ends in his expulsion from the city, and he says that he longs to see his converts again. Hence, when he had gone on to Athens, he had sent Timothy to see how they fared, and to encourage them not to be “shaken” by further persecution (3:1–5). Timothy has just returned with good news (3:6–8). Hence Paul’s heart overflows with thanks to God for answering his most earnest prayers (3:9–10). He thus writes this letter of thanks to God and encouragement to the Thessalonians.

Paul asks them to go on as they are, but even more so. “Holiness,” as Karl Donfried has argued (in *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity*), perhaps refers especially to the holiness of those being persecuted, or even to those who suffer as martyrs (see 4:1–12). The readers must not grieve about those who

have already died before Christ's coming again. They will lose nothing, and will also "be with the Lord forever" (4:15–5:11). They must also retain a healthy respect for those "who have charge of you in the Lord" (5:13), and are to "admonish the idlers" (5:14). They are to pray without ceasing (5:17), to give thanks (v. 18), and not to quench the Spirit (v. 19); and they must both respect and test "prophecy" (v. 20). Paul closes with a blessing, greeting, and request for their prayers (vv. 23–8).

1 Thessalonians reflects precisely the situation in which a pastor who is forced to be absent from his converts might be expected to write. As an evangelist Paul recalls the honest motivation and effectiveness of his proclamation, and its accompaniment by the saving work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit even now sustains them, in the face of persecution. Paul's relief at hearing a good report from Timothy inspires further thanks to God and exhortation to encouragement. News brought by Timothy prompts him to include something about Christ's coming, the death of Christians, persecution, hard work, holiness, and respect for pastors and "prophets."

Very few doubt the authenticity of the First Epistle as Pauline. Marcion included it in his canon before c. AD 160, and it was mentioned in the Muratorian Fragment, the oldest list of New Testament writings discovered in the eighth century, but dating from the second century, perhaps c. 170. Irenaeus quotes it by name (*Against Heresies* 5.6.1) c. 180. F. C. Baur was one of the few to doubt its authenticity, but his arguments about similarities with 1 Corinthians and Acts could at least as well count in favor of its authenticity! It is only "un-Pauline" if Paul's response to Judaizing tendencies in Galatians and in Romans is regarded as the measure of all Paul's theology. Before the nineteenth century its authenticity was not doubted. Origen, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ambrosiaster, and Theodoret of Cyrus (or Cyrrhus) assumed that it was genuine. The First Epistle was probably written in Corinth, during his 18-month stay there.

### *Outline and argument of 1 Thessalonians*

1. Address, thanksgiving, prayer, and reflection on the visit (1:1–10)
  - (a) address, thanksgiving, and prayer (vv. 1–6a)
  - (b) Paul's reflection on his visit: the readers as an example (vv. 6b–10)
2. Paul's autobiographical reflections and defense 2:1–3:13
  - (a) Paul's preaching: its effects and context (2:1–8)
  - (b) how Paul's readers received the gospel (2:9–16)
3. Paul's longing to see them, and Timothy's visit and news (2:17–3:13)
4. The call to holiness, especially in love and personal relationships (4:1–12)

5. The living and dead share in the Parousia and resurrection (4:13–18)
6. The day of the Lord: timing and light (5:1–11)
7. Various Christian duties and closure (5:12–28)

### *Theological features of 1 Thessalonians*

Partly because this is a letter expressing pastoral care, prayer receives mention frequently. While the thanksgiving has a conventional place in Greco-Roman letters, Paul's thanksgivings melt or fuse into thanks for God's election of the readers, the genuineness of their reception of his preaching, and both prayer for them and Paul's request for their prayers. Chapters 2 and 3 contain virtually a theology of preaching, including its method and genuineness, which Paul later takes up in 1 Cor. 2:1–5. A theology of ministry stresses the role of co-workers. Paul is no freelance individualist. Chapters 4 and 5 embrace an integration of ethics with theology, in which the role of "body," work, and love is prominent.

The centrality of God, however, remains the most striking feature. Paul addresses thanksgiving to God above all for God's work in the new converts. God has chosen them, and the readers' faith in God is noteworthy. They turned from idols "to God . . . a living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). It is "courage in our God" which gave Paul boldness to preach (2:2). His motive was "to please God" (2:4). God is his witness that he was genuine (2:5). He preaches "God's word" (2:13). Timothy is a co-worker for God" (3:2). The will of God is the readers' sanctification (4:3); they respond to God's call (4:7) and are taught "by God" (4:9). God determines their destiny (5:9). Yet this is not merely "Jewish": Paul and his colleagues are "apostles of Christ" (2:6), and hope for the dead depends on Christ's resurrection (4:16). Next after Romans, Paul's theology of God has special prominence in 1 (and 2) Thessalonians.

### **The City of Thessalonica**

The city dated back to the beginning of the fourth century BC, but was annexed by Rome in 167 BC. It was given the status of a free city in 42 BC, under the governance of five or six "politarchs," who were, in effect, its chief magistrates. As Acts indicates, it had its synagogue, with a substantial Jewish community. Paul began his ministry in Thessalonica by participating in synagogue worship, and by debating the significance of synagogue readings of the scriptures for Christianity. He traced the pattern of a suffering and raised Messiah in them. Alongside the synagogue were a number of "God-fearers," namely Gentiles who saw in the synagogue a pattern of life and thought which acknowledged

monotheism and appropriate ethics for a devout seeker after God. Jason and the nucleus of the church were originally drawn from this group. But soon they were joined by those who had been outright pagan, who “turned from idols, to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9).

By the time of Paul’s visit, the city had become increasingly cosmopolitan. It enjoyed a distinctively Greek character, yet some who spoke Latin also settled in Thessalonica, including merchants and administrators. Situated on the east–west land route, the Via Egnatia, the city became a natural center for trade and commerce. Agriculture and timber featured among its products, possibly with some mining. The city would have contained a variety of religious cults, including the “mystery religions” of Dionysus, Serapis, Cabirus, and the imperial cult. An attack on these cults was perceived as an attack on the city itself (Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 5). From 27 BC there is archaeological evidence of the rise of this imperial cult. Thessalonica was the largest city of Macedonia, with up to 80,000 within its walls, and a further 20,000 in suburbs outside the walls. Most of the population would have been manual laborers or tradespeople, but a few were probably “professional” people, including orators and aristocrats (see Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 14).

One of the most significant features of the city in relation to Paul’s preaching of the gospel was the virtually united sense of loyalty to Rome and to Augustus for the sense of “peace and security” that pervaded the city. Any “troublemaker” who tried to rock the boat would not be tolerated. The favor of Rome also allowed Thessalonica to hold events such as the Olympic Games, which would constitute a further ready source of tourism and income. The diversity of local cults became largely assimilated into the imperial cult as a single source of well-being (see Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*; Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 4–8). The Acts account of the charges and the riot is all the more plausible in this light.

## **Traditional and Nineteenth-Century Arguments about the Authenticity of 2 Thessalonians and Their Criticism**

### *The traditional patristic, medieval, and Reformation approaches*

We have noted that scarcely any doubted the authenticity of 1 Thessalonians. It remains otherwise with the Second Epistle. Up to Grotius (1583–1645) and Johann Schmidt (1801) the traditional authorship and sequence of both epistles was universally accepted. John Chrysostom assumes that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, and then wrote the Second Epistle fairly shortly afterwards to correct false ideas about the coming of Christ, and to correct notions which

circulated on account of forgeries or false prophets (*Homilies*; NPNF1 13.377–8). The so-called offensiveness of teaching about judgment and hell is no argument against Pauline authorship. On the contrary, “let it be continually spoken of . . . Let us not be over-soft” (*Homily 2 on 2 Thessalonians*; NPNF1 13.383). Theodore (*In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, 1.2) and Ambrosiaster accept both epistles, and Theodoret repeats the point about false teachers in 2 Thessalonians.

This assumption and approach prevailed through the Middle Ages, including Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas (*Commentary*, 1), and Nicolas of Lyra, and up to the time of Estius and John Calvin. Calvin assumed that the First Epistle was Pauline, and that the Second Epistle was also written by Paul (*Commentary*, 17). Hugo Grotius placed 2 Thessalonians before 1 Thessalonians in order of composition. While he recognized the Pauline authorship of the Second Epistle, he saw a certain ambiguity in the origin of the First Epistle. He believed that normally Paul added his personal “mark” in “every letter of mine; it is the way I write” (2 Thess. 3:17). Hence it is surprising that 1 Thessalonians lacks this, especially since forged letters were sent. He refers to “a letter as though from us to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here” (2 Thess. 2:2). He concludes that even if 2 Thessalonians was written first, its publication was postponed until later because some would see its language as inflammatory.

### *Attacks on the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians in the nineteenth century*

(1) In 1801 Johann E. Christian Schmidt attacked the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians for virtually the first time. He argued that there are inconsistencies between the two letters, especially over the imminence of the Parousia. 2 Thessalonians attacks a letter which purports to come from Paul, and this is probably 1 Thessalonians. Therefore Paul could not have written both epistles. Of the two, Schmidt concludes, the Second Epistle is less likely to have come from Paul. 2 Thess. 2:1–12, with its apocalyptic material, began to dominate much of this debate, and in 1839 F. H. Kern paid attention to “the man of lawlessness” in the history of interpretation. This figure came to be identified with the emperor Nero, and the “one who restrains” was to be identified with the emperor Vespasian. The “apostasy” referred to the revolt of the Jews against Rome. If this is correct, the epistle alludes to the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70). But this is too late a date for Paul. Further, Kern considers that inconsistencies exist between the two epistles (“Über II Thess. 2:1–12”).

(2) Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) argued against the Pauline authorship of both epistles. In 1845 he wrote, “My deeper penetration of the

spirit of the Apostle Paul ... increasingly confirmed me in the conviction that there is an essential difference between the four main letters of the apostle and the shorter ones ... and that the authenticity of several of the latter ... can be seriously doubted" (*Paulus, der Apostel Jesu Christi*, 486–7). Galatians and Romans (as well as 1 and 2 Corinthians) seemed not to fit with the absence of justification by grace and freedom from the law in Thessalonians. But since he restricted the "true Paul" to the four major epistles it is not surprising that he found differences from the restricted Paul.

Baur believed that the apocalyptic passage in 2 Thessalonians 2 was closer to Jewish Christianity than to Paul. He also saw 1 Corinthians 15 as differing from 2 Thessalonians. He failed to see that justification by grace and freedom from the law would become major themes *only in the light of Judaizing opponents*. He ascribed Thessalonians to AD 70–5, after Paul's death. As Beda Rigaux rightly suggests, Baur is dominated by a picture of Paul constructed only from the major epistles, so that his argument becomes circular (*Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, 125). Adolf Hilgenfeld (1862–75) not only followed Baur's approach, but pressed it further.

(3) Richard A. Lipsius (1830–92) opposed many of Baur's conclusions. In 1854 he made the predictable point that Paul taught not only justification through faith alone by grace, but also sanctification by the Holy Spirit and identification with Christ. These are twin central Pauline themes, and Thessalonians especially teaches the latter. Faith involves life and public lifestyle, not merely inner belief. Eschatology, he urged, far from striking a "Jewish" or discordant note, provides a unifying focus for all Paul's thought and in particular his main twin themes. The sixth edition of Wilhelm Bornemann's (d. 1858) commentary on Thessalonians in the Meyer series (1894) provided a meticulous history of interpretation and criticism (*Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, 19–39, 324–59). Bornemann conceded that the two epistles were similar, but he saw the Second Epistle as more formal and objective (460–70), and reflecting a more apocalyptic tone (470–92). Bornemann concludes that 1 Thessalonians is genuinely Pauline, and 2 Thessalonians probably so.

(4) William Wrede (1859–1906) inaugurated a new era in the discussion of Thessalonians. He aimed at "presuppositionless" historical-critical research. He examined especially the literary dependence of 2 Thessalonians upon 1 Thessalonians, and published his research in 1903. He found close parallels between 1 Thess. 1:2–12 and 2 Thess. 1:3–12; between 1 Thess. 2:12–13 and 2 Thess. 2:13–14; between 1 Thess. 4:1–5:23 and 2 Thess. 3:6–15. On the other hand, no parallel existed with 2 Thess. 2:1–12. Wrede inferred that 2 Thessalonians largely depended on 1 Thessalonians, except for 2 Thess. 2:1–12. The parallels are simply too close, he argued, for Paul to have been the author of both. Wrede claimed that the Second Epistle "is a fiction" (*Die Echtheit des*

*zweiten Thessalonicherbriefs Untersucht*, 36). “Prophets” created the Second Letter in Paul’s name. Hence they imitated much of his style to give this epistle authority to correct or to oppose much in the First Letter.

Wrede’s theory had a profound and widespread influence. In addition to his main analysis, he challenged the genuinely Pauline character of “righteous judgement” (2 Thess. 1:5); the theme of (Greek) *thlibontes* in 2 Thessalonians; persecution or suffering as a sign of “worthiness” of the kingdom of God, as in Acts; the punitive nature of the last judgment. Wrede believed that the eschatology of the two epistles did not match, but he nevertheless sees apocalyptic Judaism as an important context for Paul. He does not see justification as central to Paul, and therefore does not share some of Baur’s problems. But, like Baur, he sees a gulf between Jesus and Paul, regarding Paul as the “second founder of Christianity.” 2 Thessalonians was not necessarily directed to the Thessalonians at all.

### *Responses, largely from Jowett and Lünemann*

Benjamin Jowett (1817–93) provided an immediate response to the skepticism of Baur in the mid nineteenth century, which is conveniently accessible in the second edition of his commentary (*Thessalonians, Galatians and Romans*, esp. 143–9). Similarly numbered responses, but also addressing Hilgenfeld and Kern, occur in Gottlieb Lünemann’s (1819–94) commentary in the Meyer series in the third edition of 1867 (*Thessalonians*, 173–82). Lünemann’s argument (as well as Jowett’s) is as follows:

(1) The antiquity and authenticity of 2 Thessalonians are “completely unassailable” in terms of ancient attestation (*Thessalonians*, 173). He cites Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 11; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.7.2; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5; Tertullian, *On the Resurrection* 24; the Muratorian Canon, Marcion, and others. He observes, “Doubts from internal grounds did not arise until the beginning of the nineteenth century” (173). He refers to Christian Schmidt in 1801, but also to J. M. de Wette’s initial skepticism and his later withdrawal of objections in 1842. He addresses Baur, Hilgenfeld, and Kern head-on.

(2) Lünemann addresses Kern’s idea that 2 Thess. 2:1–12 must presuppose a date later than Paul because allegedly it refers to a time following the death of Nero in 68. He disputes Kern’s exegesis of the passage, and quotes Kern as admitting that the epistle is “Pauline” in the sense of representing Pauline thought. Kern declares, “The Epistle might be called Pauline in the wider sense,” but Lünemann is more specific: there is no valid reason to doubt that Paul

wrote it. Jowett also addresses this point. He writes, “Prophecies of the New Testament do not relate to particular events, but to the state of the world in general. They are not political but spiritual” (*Thessalonians, Galatians and Romans*, 144). Paul’s use of apocalyptic, he asserts, simply demonstrates his Jewish and Old Testament roots.

(3) Lünemann next addresses the question raised by Paul’s allusion to “marks” (Greek, *ho esti sēmeion*) to guarantee the genuineness of an epistle (2 Thess. 2:2). Once forgeries had been made, Paul uses his “mark” in Gal. 6:11; 1 Cor. 16:21; and Col. 4:18 (177). Jowett makes exactly the same point, calling this “the strongest objection urged by Baur against the genuineness of the epistle” (*Thessalonians, Galatians and Romans*, 145–6). We should not expect such a personal “mark” in 1 Thessalonians. Moreover an allusion to “forged letters” does not imply at all that 2 Thessalonians was “forged.”

(4) The likeness to 1 Thessalonians in style and content is alleged to imply the work of an imitator. But there are several indications to the contrary. Jowett and Lünemann examine phrases in detail. There is nothing remarkable about “we ought to give thanks” (Greek, *eucharistein ophelomen*, 1:3; 2:13). Several other examples are considered. Moreover, they also cite differences of style and vocabulary. Similarities and differences are what we might expect, if the Second Epistle follows very soon after the first (Jowett, *Thessalonians, Galatians and Romans*, 146–9; Lünemann, *Thessalonians*, 177–8). Lünemann claims, “A great diversity will be seen in many of those compared passages ... not greater than that between the Epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians, and ... Galatians and Romans” (178). The alleged inconsistency of content is precarious in the extreme. Jowett dismisses the claim when he declares, “No argument ... is more unsafe” (143). Similarities may be all the more likely if Paul kept a copy of 1 Thessalonians which he had to hand, and which we now know is possible (see below).

(5) Baur’s argument that the substance of 2 Thessalonians does not match Paul is entirely circular when he has defined “Paul” in terms of the polemical statements about “the law” in Galatians and in Romans. Baur’s objections, Lünemann declares, show a “wantonness and superficiality,” which is “evident” (*Thessalonians*, 179).

## The Situation and Substance of 2 Thessalonians

### *The circumstances of writing*

We simply do not know the exact date of the Second Epistle, but it contains sufficient echoes of the First to assume that Paul wrote both within a very short period, but after enough time had elapsed for some new problems and questions

to have arisen in the church. Further, Paul had sent Timothy to Thessalonica to report news of the progress of the young church when “he could bear no longer” the suspense of not knowing whether they were standing firm, whether they faced new problems, and whether persecution continued.

In the event, Timothy brought good news. Some have suggested that Paul wrote to a different section of the church, but there is no real evidence for this. As we noted, that it has recently been shown that copies of letters could be made more readily than writers had assumed suggests that Paul may even have kept a copy of 1 Thessalonians, partly to work from it (Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter Writer*, 8–19, 35–7; Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*, 2.42).

Paul knew well the importance and necessity of reiteration. Just as he had exhorted the readers to a given lifestyle in the First Epistle, he reinforces much of his earlier material. The style is admittedly more formal or less personal because he knew his readers personally in the First Epistle, but others had joined the church by the time he wrote the Second Epistle. The most distinctive feature is the “apocalyptic” passage in 2 Thess. 2:1–12. But a number of modern writers have rightly argued that apocalyptic belongs to the heart of Paul and early Christianity. Klaus Koch, Ernst Käsemann, J. Christiaan Beker, J. Louis Martyn, and Alexandra R. Brown are some of those who powerfully urge this case.

### *The special contribution of apocalyptic*

Alexandra Brown and Karl Donfried argue that apocalyptic, with its emphasis upon God and new creation, remains especially relevant to persecution and to suffering. Brown writes: “From the conventional perspective of the old world, it [the cross] is the symbol of suffering, weakness, folly, and death. But from the perspective of the new creation, it is the transforming symbol of power and life ... Apocalyptic language not only says something but does something in the saying. It does not merely describe a state of affairs, it produces hope” (*Cross and Human Transformation*, 14–15). Karl Donfried quotes J. S. Pobee. They assert: “The point is the martyr spirit in which they accepted affliction with patience for the sake of God” (Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity*, 126; Pobee, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” 69–70).

Ernst Käsemann famously argued for the importance of “primitive Christian apocalyptic” for Paul (*New Testament Questions*, 108–37). He commented: “Without it, his [Paul’s] whole anti-enthusiastic argument would lose its heart and its meaning ... Paul is absolutely unable and unwilling to speak of any end

to history which has already come to pass,” but the end time “has already broken” (133). His theology of the body as “that piece of the world which we ourselves are” occurs in this context (135). He concludes, “I describe apocalyptic as the mother of Christian theology” (137).

The subtitle of Klaus Koch’s book *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy* (1972) says it all. He redefines apocalyptic more positively. He attacks Hilgenfeld, the “History of Religion School,” and demythologizing, and traces the rebirth of apocalyptic from Wilckens and Käsemann to Moltmann and Pannenberg. Apocalyptic reflects Wolfhart Pannenberg’s early dictum, “History is the most comprehensive horizon of Christian theology” (102). Koch writes: “The apocalyptists ... proclaim that the world is constantly being shaped and reshaped by God: they announce a mighty and ultimate divine revolution” (131).

J. Christiaan Beker associates “Paul’s own lack of narcissistic self-concern and introspection” with his understanding of apostleship, the truth of God, and apocalyptic (*Paul and the Apostle*, 4). He declares: “Apocalyptic ... constitutes the heart of Paul’s gospel, inasmuch as all that is said about Christ ... will imminently climax in the regnum Dei [the rule of God]” (17). This is not an alternative theme to that of justification by faith, but its condition. It provides “both ‘truth’ and ‘effective word’” (17), as it does in 2 Thessalonians. J. Louis Martyn adopts a similar approach, but in his case Paul’s concern for apocalyptic leads to a focus on an epistemology (or theory of knowledge) centered on the cross and resurrection as an act of God (“Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages: 2 Cor. 5:16”; “Apocalyptic Antimonies in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians”). It revolutionizes how humans perceive the world.

### *Other additional features*

Apocalyptic is not the only feature peculiar to 2 Thessalonians, even if it is the most prominent. The damping down of overeagerness about the imminence of the Parousia, or coming of Christ, is achieved by stating that certain events must take place first. This does not “contradict” the First Epistle, in which Paul stresses that the date of the Parousia is unknown. It clarifies and supplements it, and corrects a misunderstanding. The fathers of the church saw no tension here. Chrysostom, we noted, welcomed the emphasis on the judgment of God, even if some found it unpalatable. The stress on holiness of life is seen by many as a concomitant of suffering and of apocalyptic. While God’s people aim at holiness, God will guard them and direct their hearts.

The Second Epistle includes a distinctive warning against “idleness” (3:6–13). There is a hint that the readers may have become overtolerant to lax believers

(3:14–15). The Greek word often translated “idle” is *ataktos* (3:6, 7, 11; see 1 Thess. 5:14). This word strictly means “disorderly,” or disruptive, but certainly includes idleness and lack of self-discipline. This may have been related to misunderstandings about Christ’s return. John B. Polhill comments: “Throughout Christian history, groups that emphasize the imminent return of the Lord have been known to abandon their livelihood and cease normal human activity. This could have happened in Thessalonica” (*Paul and His Letters*, 198).

The adjacent pastoral advice to imitate Paul may be as a result of a natural association of ideas. It has been suggested that one of the few wealthy pastors in the church may have been providing space above a ground-floor workshop for worship and common meals, perhaps in the inner city. It is possible that a number of the urban poor availed themselves of the communal meals, while Paul set an example of hard manual labor in the shop below, probably as a leather-worker. Hence he urges his readers to imitate his industry, and not merely to sponge off others. Robert Jewett follows C. Spicq in regarding the *ataktoi* not simply as “idlers,” but as obstinate, refractory, or insubordinate people, probably from the urban poor, who refused to play their part in the congregation (*Thessalonian Correspondence*, 104–5).

Paul concludes with a prayer of blessing and a comment about his “mark” (3:16–18). Blessings appear at more than one point (2:16–17; 3:16, 18), perhaps partly because Paul’s letters would have been read aloud to the church, and partly because Paul constantly gives thanks for these Christians, who grow in the faith, and cause no really serious heartache, even in spite of grumbles, criticisms, and misunderstandings that characterize an average Christian congregation. Ernest Best rightly concludes that in the whole Thessalonian correspondence, “There is no passion as there is in so many of Paul’s other letters, because there is no group against which Paul can be passionate” (*Thessalonians*, 22). An example of this kind of passion can be seen in Galatians and 1 Corinthians 1–6.

### *Outline of 2 Thessalonians*

1. Address, greetings and thanksgiving (1:1–4)
2. Encouragement and prayer: God’s judgment and Christ’s resurrection (1: 5–12)
3. The day of the Lord (2:1–12)
  - (a) the advent of Christ and “the man of sin” (2:1–5)
  - (b) “he who restrains” and “the lawless one” (2:6–12)
4. Thanksgiving, exhortation, and benediction (2:13–17)

5. Further prayer and exhortation: largely new issues (3:1–18)
  - (a) further request for prayer (3:1–5)
  - (b) exhortation and admonition on “idleness” and the undisciplined (3:6–13)
  - (c) final exhortations, greetings and benediction (3:14–18)

### **Some Key Interpreters in the Reception History of 1 and 2 Thessalonians**

The reception history explored in this commentary concerns not primarily contemporary thinkers and commentators, but also voices from the eras of the church fathers, the Middle Ages, the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus writers from, for example, Irenaeus and Tertullian, through Augustine and Bede, to Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Estius, and finally to Jonathan Edwards, John Newton, John and Charles Wesley, Benjamin Jowett, and J. B. Lightfoot, become the major focus of attention in examples of reception history, alongside other writers from these periods (for further details on these writers, see Brief Biographies at the end of the book). Contemporary and recent authors feature only in the introductory sections to each block of text, to highlight briefly any major problems of interpretation, which may now call upon more specialist New Testament studies.



# 1 Thessalonians



# 1 Thessalonians

1:1–10

## **Paul's Address, Thanksgiving, Prayer, and Reflection on His Visit**

### **Address, Thanksgiving, and Prayer (1 Thess. 1:1–6a)**

#### **Introduction and Overview**

The greeting and salutation in 1 Thess. 1:1 bears the name of Paul and his co-workers Silvanus and Timothy. Paul is not a lone missionary-pastor, but exercises a collaborative ministry alongside others. A number of writers have recently

called attention to this fact, especially Ollrog (*Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter*), Bruce (*The Pauline Circle*), and Harrington (“Paul and Collaborative Ministry”).

Paul omits any chosen authoritative title, standing alongside his readers or hearers in friendship. The writers modify the merely conventional greeting-form, which is used in Greco-Roman literature, combining the traditional Hebrew greeting *shālōm* (*peace* or *well-being*) with the traditional Greek greeting *chairein* changed to *charis* (*grace*). In v. 1 they speak of the readers as “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Neil Richardson (*Paul’s Language about God*) shows how closely Paul related Christ with God theologically, and Larry W. Hurtado (*One God, One Lord; Lord Jesus Christ*) has shown how very quickly Christians associated Christ with God in Christian devotion. Thus v. 1 sets out a potentially Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesiological theology.

Many modern scholars refer to “a thanksgiving form” as a regular feature of Greco-Roman letters (O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul*; Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul the Letter Writer*, 55–64). Thanksgiving can be found among Paul’s contemporaries (Philo, *Special Laws* 1.211; *De Plantatione* 130; Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1), and in other Greek-speaking Jewish writers (Wis. 16:28; Sir. 37:11; 2 Macc. 1:10–11); and in non-Christian writers of the second century (*Corpus Hermeticum* 13.18). In 1 Thess. 1:2 the thanksgiving melts or merges into the body of the letter, as it does in Phil. 1:3. But this thanksgiving is warm and affectionate, not merely conventional. For example, Paul addresses the readers as “brothers” (or NRSV, “brothers and sisters”). This was an early term for fellow Christians, and it is repeated in this Epistle some 13 times as an address. It suggests warm affection and solidarity with the readers. They establish new bonds in a new community.

Paul typically begins his letter with *prayer*, which becomes a repeated theme, and which he promises to offer constantly, as a caring pastor. *Faith*, *love* (v. 3), and *election* (v. 4) become key words in Paul, and *faith*. Further, *election* remains forceful, anticipating Rom. 8:33, “God’s elect,” and 16:13, “Rufus, chosen in the Lord.” Election may seem offensive to some modern readers, as constituting an attack on human freedom, but Paul’s point is that the validity of the readers’ faith does not rest ultimately on their own determination. This theme pervades the biblical writings, including God’s choice of Noah (Gen. 6:8; 8:1; 9:9); of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:15; 15:18; 17:7); of Jacob (Isa. 41:9); of Israel (Isa. 41:8; 43:10); of Israel in Paul’s thought (Rom. 11:5, 28); and of the church (Rom. 8:33; 1 Cor. 1:28; Col. 3:12).

Ben Witherington argues that whereas the *Exordium* (vv. 2, 3) is often rhetorically distinct from the *Narratio* (vv. 4–10), here “the *exordium* flows naturally into the *narration* ... in vv. 4, 5” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 52). In epideictic rhetoric there is some repetition because it amplifies its themes. But even if Paul sometimes follows rhetorical procedures, writers tend to see the epistolary genre and theological content as more important than rhetorical

forms. The phrase “not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit” (v. 5) also becomes a typically Pauline one (1 Cor. 2:4–5; 4:20; 2 Cor. 13:3–4; 1 Thess. 3:13). Karl Barth expounds this Pauline theme in *The Resurrection of the Dead* (17–20). *Affliction* (v. 6, Greek, *thlipsis*) is frequent in the LXX. It occurs in Paul in 2 Cor. 1:4–6, Phil. 4:14, Rom. 12:12, as well as 1 Thess. 3:3, 7 and 2 Thess. 1:4, 6. The contrast “humiliation ... glory” became a regular one in Paul.

*Imitators* (v. 6, Greek, *mimētai*) occurs in Paul in 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Eph. 5:1; and 1 Thess. 2:4. Antoinette Wire and Elizabeth Castelli argue that Paul’s language about imitation imposed an authoritarian and manipulative rhetoric upon the Pauline communities. Castelli appealed to Michel Foucault’s notion of disguised power for particular comparison with 1 Cor. 4:15–16 and 11:1–16 (*Imitating Paul*, 89–117). But this would undermine Paul’s claim that “our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery” (1 Thess. 2:3), reducing it either to a cynical lie, or to gross self-deception.

Jauss seeks from reception history evidence of a stable continuity of interpretation, as well as examples of provocation. The themes of co-workers, Paul’s lack of an authoritative title, the association of Christ with God the Father, the affectionate thanksgiving, and the importance of the typically Pauline themes of faith, love, and prayer all demonstrate continuity with traditional readings. By contrast, inferences from “imitation” and speculation about rhetorical form present tensions between the present and the past.

## The Apostolic Fathers and the Patristic Era

**Ignatius** (c. 35–c. 107) expresses thanksgiving to God in letters (*Epistle to Philadelphians* 6.3; ANF 1.83; *To Smyrna* 10.1; ANF 1.91; *To Ephesus* 21; ANF 1.58).

**Clement of Rome** uses “grace and peace” from God in his letter (c. 96) (*1 Clem.* 1.1; ANF 1.5). **Polycarp** (c. 69–c. 155) comments that Paul wrote letters to enable the readers “to grow in the faith ... accompanied by hope, and led by love” (*Letter of Polycarp* 3.2–3, Greek and English, Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 1.286–7; ANF 1.33; see 1 Thess. 1:4).

**Justin** (c. 100–c. 165), an early apologist, adopts a similar approach (*Dialogue with Trypho* 41.1, 3; ANF 1.215; *1 Apology* 65.3; ANF 1.185). **Tatian** (2nd century) urges that thanks are ever due to God (*Address to the Greeks* 20; ANF 2.73).

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) links faith with hope (v. 3): “Hope is based on faith” (*Stromata* 2.6; ANF 2.353). He connects faith with hope and love, as Paul does here (*Stromata* 2.12; ANF 1.359). The so-called Liturgy of St. Mark, the Liturgy of the Church of Alexandria, offers “praise, ... adoration, and thanks giving” to “the Father and the Holy Spirit ... for evermore” (*Liturgy of St Mark* 3; ANF 7.560).

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) comments on 1 Thess. 1:1: “Paul not only says what he says through grace, but he also prays for grace to be given to his hearers”

(*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 9.2.6; FC 104.200). Elsewhere he observes that three made a symphony or harmony when Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy gave instruction by letter to the Thessalonians (*Commentary on Matthew* 14.1; ANF 10.495). He notes: “Through this, he [Paul] is showing that where two or three were found as one, the Holy Spirit had elicited one sense between them and one speech ... They say and think one thing” (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 10.7.6; FC 104.270–1). Commenting on the “Christianization” of Paul’s form of greeting, Origen also sees how Paul “can clothe the great ideas in common language” (*Against Celsus* 3.20; ANF 4.471). Origen insists that prayer must be offered to God the Father through Christ, and, referring to 1 Thessalonians, adds that this is prompted by the Holy Spirit (*On Prayer* 12.2). Citing Paul, Origen observes, “Having begun with praise, it is right to conclude the prayer by ending with thanksgiving” (*On Prayer* 33.6).

**Basil the Great** (c. 330–379) refers to the close association of the three co-workers to illustrate his concern for the co-equality of the Holy Trinity, when the three in both cases work together with one purpose. The threefold *Gloria* was especially important to Basil (*On the Spirit* 25.58; NPNF2 8.36–7; and in *Letters*, 210).

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) writes that the three mentioned in the salutation and thereafter might seem to be overseers or bishops (*episcoporum*) in name, but the sense and the words are apostolic (*Ad Thessalonicenses prima* 212). Paul always gives thanks for the readers. He expounds “hope” as looking for the coming of the Lord. The Holy Spirit works “in much fullness” and power, and is no delusion, but shows “God’s superabundance of grace” (213).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) observes about Timothy that Paul wrote: “I have no one like-minded, who cares truly for your state” (Phil. 2:20); but adds that Paul places Silvanus before Timothy (*Homily on 1 Thessalonians* 1; NPNF1 13.323). Chrysostom notes, “Here, he [Paul] gives himself *no title*, not “an Apostle,” not “a servant,” I suppose because the men [the readers] ... had not yet any experience of him” (323). He comments that this epistle ranks probably as Paul’s earliest. Hence he declares: “It is probable that there were few, and they were not yet formed into a body” (324). Moreover, Paul addresses not simply *any* assembly of people, but those who are characterized as *Christians*. Hence, Chrysostom observes, they are in God, as “applied both to the Father and the Son” (314). He prays that the church of his day may also deserve such a title. Chrysostom speaks of Paul’s thanksgiving “for their great advancement” and “good conduct,” which issues in faith, love, and hope (vv. 2, 3, 6). He notes that hope is linked with steadfastness or patience, because the Christians at Thessalonica accept suffering. He writes, “If thou believest, suffer all things; if thou dost not suffer, thou dost not believe” (*Homily* 1; NPNF1 13.324). Labor is involved in genuine love, just as faith shows itself in works. He alludes to Acts 17:5, 6, where Jason exposed himself to danger for Paul and his co-workers, as

part of a work of love. Chrysostom's remarks on preaching illuminate our understanding of "not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit" (v. 5). Preaching, he maintained, *constituted no light matter, and certainly not the rhetoric of flattery, but is characterized by the power of God*, by readiness to undergo immediate persecution; and by a response which pointed to the Christians' election and to their assurance and joy in the Holy Spirit. Here he refers to Acts 5:41, where the apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Christ (*Homily 1*; NPNF1 13.325).

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) speaks of the readers' election and effective signs of the Spirit. He observes how Paul conveyed the message of the gospel, not only through the spoken word, but also showing miracles and great glory by the power of the Spirit. He also notes how in the midst of their tribulations, Paul places the readers on the heart of God by his unceasing prayer (*Ad Thessalonicenses 1.4*). **Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430) refers to the perfect love (*caritas*) of God in Christ, which can sustain the readers patiently on account of their future hope (*Expositions*, 418).

**Macarius** (4th–early 5th century) was the author of four collections of homilies, and expounded Messalianism. This partly Syrian and later Egyptian movement, which endured to the seventh century, held that humankind is inhabited by demons, who could be expelled only by a radical experience of the Spirit and prayer. They appealed to such passages as 1 Thess. 1:5 on "power and the Holy Spirit, and much assurance."

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) points out that Paul accompanied Silas in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (Acts 17:10). Theodoret understands *grace* (*gratia*) in its fullest theological sense to imply *salvation* in the Lord (*In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, 2.107). Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon* demonstrates how rapidly "grace" (Greek, *charis*) assumed its full and multiform theological meaning (1514–18). Theodoret notes on Paul's thanksgiving (v. 2), "We are taught first to give thanks for the good things that have come our way, and thus to leave till later requests for what is lacking" (108).

## The Medieval Period

**Bede the Venerable** (c. 673–735) refers to Augustine on Paul's contrast between the church and the synagogue. The apostles always called their Christian gathering a church, to distinguish it from a gathering (*congregatio* or *synagōgē*) of the Jews. The Latin *convocatio* usually denotes the church. He writes, "Even flocks are "gathered," while "assembled" is used of those who employ reason, as do human beings" (*Excerpts from the Works of St. Augustine*, 285).

**Rabanus Maurus** of Mainz (c. 780–856), poet, teacher, and pupil of Alcuin, repeats Augustine’s and Bede’s comment to the effect that Paul “never says ‘synagogue’ but always ‘Church’” (PL 112.541). He refers to the readers’ full *election* to the complete faith, confirmed with the power and signs of the Holy Spirit, issuing in their labor, their patience, and even their suffering (541–2). He declares: “After this faith, then, learn to have firm hope which draws our spirit to things invisible and ingrafts our attention upon the heavenly and eternal ... In every time of deep tribulation we ought to run with hope to the consolation of the higher piety ... We especially exhort you to take care to have love in you and show it by action in all things. Without this no man will see God” (*Five Sermons*, 308–9).

**Lanfranc of Canterbury** (c. 1010–89) gives only a brief comment, and repeatedly quotes Ambrosiaster. He notes, as Chrysostom does, the absence of such a title as “apostle,” and his praise for the readers’ faithfulness in the face of opposition. Paul gave thanks for their election and that their discipleship provided a model for others. The Holy Spirit was active among the readers (PL 150.331).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) observes, “The Apostle ... does not mention his title, but supplies only his humble name” (*Commentary*, 5). He also writes, “[Paul] adds the names of two persons who have preached to them with him: Silvanus, who is Silas, and Timothy ... as is mentioned in Acts 16” (5). Thomas pointed out that Paul’s thanks are directed to God, not to people, because “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above ... from the Father of lights” (Jas. 1:17; *Commentary*, 6). Paul gives thanks for them all. Like Chrysostom, Aquinas notes the triad of faith, love, and hope. Faith is the starting point (see Heb. 11:6, “Whoever would approach God must believe that he exists ...”), but it issues in good works, for “Faith apart from works is dead” (Jas. 2:26). Patience is related to sufferings, as is the case with Job (Jas. 5:11). Election is a source of thanksgiving.

Aquinas comments further that election underlines the absence of personal merit: “Though you did not merit this election, rather you are freely chosen by God.” The kingdom of God comes with power, as in 1 Cor. 2:4 and 4:20 (*Commentary*, 7). The role of the Holy Spirit reflects Peter’s preaching in Acts 10:44. Aquinas gives cross-references to Acts, 1 Corinthians, Hebrews, and James. Aquinas sees this close association of the Father and the Son as pointing to “the faith of the Trinity and the divinity and humanity of Christ.” The Holy Spirit is implied as the bond between the Father and the Son (*Commentary*, 5).

In the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas includes extensive sections on faith (2.2, qu. 2–7), on hope (2.2, qu. 17–22), and on love (2.2, qu. 23–33). He writes, “Expectation is ... the symbol of faith ... An act of hope presupposes an act of faith” (2.2, qu. 17, art. 6, ad 2). An act of love is more than friendship, for it is

“for God’s sake” (2.2, qu. 23, art. 1). Genuine charity could undo the bad effects of cupidity (2.2, qu. 23, art. 2). Aquinas also writes, “Charity is love, not all love is charity” (*Summa Theologiae* 1.2, qu. 62, art. 2). “We must look for the perfection of the Christian life in charity” (2.2, qu. 184, art. 2). Nevertheless Aquinas and the Reformers agree that election implies God’s sovereign, unmerited grace. Virtually every Christian writer agrees with Thomas’s comment: “Love (*caritas*) is at the center of every virtue” (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 151, art. 2). He adds: “No one is silly enough to suppose that divine activity is prompted by our deserving” (1, qu. 23, art. 5). He cites Paul in Rom. 9:13, and Augustine on Matt. 20:1–16. God’s will, he said, is the reason for salvation (1, qu. 23, art. 3).

Also in the thirteenth century the **Béguines** owed much to Bernard and to “The Seven Degrees of Love.” **Hadewijch** of Antwerp, from the Béguine movement, has been credited with writing:

Ah! sweet Love, I would that I were love,  
And loved thee, Love, with love itself!  
Ah! sweet Love, for love’s sake grant  
That love may wholly know her love.

**John Huss** (1371–1415) similarly urges faithfulness, as Paul urged the Thessalonians (*On Simony* 6, p. 247). At the conclusion of this work he brings together “our faith, hope, [and] love” (*On Simony* 10, p. 278). **Nicholas of Cusa** (1401–64) writes, “Two things only hast thou taught, O Saviour Christ – faith and love. By faith the intellect has access to the Word; by love ‘tis united thereto; the nearer it approaches, the more it waxes in power; the more it loves, the more it establishes itself in its light” (*On Learned Ignorance* 3.9, 11, in Petry (ed.), *Late Mediaeval Mysticism*, 381). **Desiderius Erasmus** (c. 1467–1536) asserts that “Faith is the sole door to Christ.” This is “the first rule” (*Enchiridion* 8, in Spinka (ed.), *Advocates of Reform*, 322). He continues, “With all your heart fixed . . . let your faith rest . . . Let nothing move you” (322).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) understands faith primarily as a personal appropriation of grace. He distinguishes it from belief (*credere*). To believe seems “an easy thing to many people . . . But . . . such faith is human, like any other mental activity of man . . . James calls faith of such a kind ‘dead faith’ . . . It is faith about God, not faith in God” (*Epistle to the Hebrews* 209, in *Early Theological Works*, 16). Genuine faith comes “from grace” (210). The biblical accounts of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the Judges show this (210–25). It is said of all the

believing saints that they were “found faithful” (226). In his *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* (1522) Luther declares: “Faith is a living, daring, confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life upon it a thousand times. This confidence in God’s grace ... makes men glad and bold and happy ... Hence a man is ready and glad, without compulsion, to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything in love and praise of God, who were shown him this grace” (*Luther’s Works*, 35.370–1; also in *Luther, Selections*, 24). This readily explains why faith in 1 Thess. 1:3 leads to Paul’s reference to the readers’ labor of love and steadfastness of hope in the face of persecution or oppression (v. 3).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) comments that Paul introduces himself “without any title of honour,” because the Christians in Thessalonica “acknowledged him to be what he was” (*Commentary*, 17). He further comments that Paul cites “others along with himself, in common with himself, as the authors of the letter” (17). Calvin finds this passage of special interest. In reaction against a quasi-mechanical view of apostolic succession, widely perceived at the Reformation as implied in Catholic theology, Calvin insists that “a true and lawful church ... is to be sought only where God presides and Christ reigns” (17). Like others before him, he noted that Paul’s praise and thanks are directed to God, but added that this prevents the sense of “congratulations” to the readers, as if to “puff them up with pride.” On the other hand “a recognition of the gifts of God humbles pious minds” (18). God manifested in this church “the gifts of the Spirit.” Faith is a special token of the power and efficacy of the Holy Spirit, and “in the cultivation of love they have not scorned trouble or labour” (18). Endurance and patience characterized their reaction to afflictions, persecutions, and suffering (as in Rom. 8:25). Calvin noted Paul’s rejection of pretense: “All mere pretence must vanish when people come into the presence of God” (19). As we might expect, he saw the good Christian character of the readers as “evidence of a sure election” (19, on 1 Thess. 1:4).

The power of the Holy Spirit, Calvin comments, enabled the readers to have a “deep conviction” about the truth of the gospel, and to see it confirmed “by solid proofs” (20). But against the left-wing Pietists of the Reformation, Calvin did not understand “power” as miracles, but as including “right doctrine.” Similarly he rejected the notion that there is “no eternal predestination of God that distinguishes between us and reprobates” (20). To suggest this is to undermine grace, which points to “gratuitous election” (20). Calvin pressed this further in his comment on the joy given by the Holy Spirit in v. 6. This teaches us that “it is not by the instigation of the flesh, or the promptings of their own nature that men will be ready and eager to obey God; this is the work of God’s Spirit” (21). The threat of severe suffering shows that they were not intimidated by the fear of the cross.

Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* broadly confirm the themes of his *Commentary*. He comments explicitly on Paul's gospel as "not in word, but in power" (1 Thess. 1:5; *Institutes* 4.1.6; tr. Beveridge, 2.287). The context of chapter 1 was "Of the True Church," and article 6 states that a church's ministry is effective, provided that the Holy Spirit remains active within it. He has said that "by the faith of the Gospel Christ becomes ours" (4.1.1; 280). "The corruptions of the Papacy" seek to add more conditions for a true church. But the elect are joined together as Paul sets it out in 1 Thess. 1:1–6. Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but God, who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:7). Hence we cannot confuse the mixed, visible church with the pure, "invisible" church (*Institutes* 4.1.7–15; tr. Beveridge, 288–94).

**William Estius** (1542–1613), Catholic chancellor of Douay, repeatedly draws on other patristic or Catholic commentators, and compares various manuscript readings. Like Chrysostom, he notes Paul's absence of title, and follows Cajetan in suggesting that this is due to his deference toward Silvanus. Silvanus labored with Paul and Barnabas in the gospel (*Commentarii in Omnes D. Pauli Epistolas*, 2.550). The close association of God the Father and Jesus Christ in v. 1, he says, is correct, not least because salvation comes through Christ, his merit, and his Passion. In vv. 2–3 Paul gives thanks "unceasingly" (Greek, *adialeiptōs*; Latin, *indeseinenter*), remembering their triad of faith, hope, and love. These virtues sustain them in the face of opposition, as they await the coming of Christ with endurance (551). In v. 4, Paul's "knowledge" of the readers' election comes from God by revelation. Estius stresses their election, as Thomas did. The Holy Spirit gives them full conviction (v. 5; 552). The "power" of which Paul speaks (v. 5) may well include miracles.

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) was a Dutch theologian, widely known as an opponent of Calvin on predestination, yet fully committed to the Protestant faith. John Wesley and Methodism were strongly influenced by him. Like Calvin, Arminius comments particularly on "Our Gospel came to you not in word only, but in the power of the Holy Spirit" (v. 3). He writes, "He [Paul] openly attributes to the power of the Holy Ghost the certainty by which the faithful receive the word of the gospel" (*Works*, 1.9.49). He states, "the Papists" urge that anyone may claim the revelation of the Spirit, but they lack it. Arminius dismisses the argument. Jews and Muslims claim revelation, but this does not mean that Christians cannot claim revelation. He asks, "Will the true Church be any less a Church because the sons of a stranger arrogate that title to themselves?" (49). The Holy Spirit spoke through Paul's word. Arminius comments, "The Scripture perfectly delivers this truth ... the doctrine of faith, hope, and charity ... 1 Thess. 1:3" (1.20.224).

**Lancelot Andrewes** (1555–1626) became successively bishop of Ely, bishop of Winchester, and bishop of Chichester. He was chaplain to Queen Elizabeth,

and worked under James I on the Authorized Version of the Bible. His well-known work *Private Devotions* contained his “The First Day,” which was taken from a series of morning prayers:

Grant me, Lord, to love those who love me;  
 My own friends, and my father’s friends ...  
 Thou who wouldst that we overcome evil with good,  
 And pray for those who persecute us,  
 Have pity on my enemies, Lord, as on me,  
 And lead them together with me to thy heavenly kingdom.  
 Thou who grantest the prayers thy servants make for one another,  
 Remember, Lord, for good, and pity all those who remember me in their prayers,  
 Or whom I have promised to remember in mine ...  
 (“Intercessions,” *Private Devotions*)

**George Herbert** (1593–1633), poet and hymn-writer, writes on *hope* (v. 3):

I gave to Hope a watch of mine; but he  
 An anchor gave to me,  
 Then an old Prayer-book I did present:  
 And he an optick sent.  
 With that I gave a viall full of tears:  
 But he a few green eares.  
 Ah Loyterer! I’le no more, no more, I’le bring:  
 I did expect a ring.  
 (*Works*, 125)

Herbert also wrote more than one poem on *prayer*. One that reflects v. 2 reads as follows:

Of what an easie quick accesse,  
 My blessed Lord, art thou! How suddenly  
 May our requests thine eare invade!  
 To shew that state dislikes not easinesse,  
 If I but lift mine eyes, my suit is made:  
 Thou canst no more not heare, then thou canst die ...  
  
 Since then these three wait on thy throne,  
*Ease, Power, and Love*; I value prayer so,  
 That were I to leave all but one,  
 Wealth, fame, endowments, vertues, all should go;  
 I and deare prayer would together dwell,  
 And quickly gain, for each inch lost, an ell.  
 (*Works*, 104)

Herbert's poems on *love* spoke more of love from God than of love to one another, but we recall his outstanding poem "Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back" (104). George Herbert wrote of *election* (v. 4): "Blessed be God! ... Thou hast elected us, thou hast called us, thou hast justified us, sanctified, and glorified us: Thou wast born for us, and thou livedst and diedst for us: Thou hast given us the blessings of this life, and of a better" ("A Prayer After the Sermon," *Works*, 300).

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) similarly wrote that Paul appeals to no title "Because his apostleship was not doubted by them, and there were no false apostles among them to question or deny it" (*Commentary*, 731). Poole insisted that Paul does not mean God as Father in Plato's or Homer's sense, but in the distinctively "gospel" sense of the covenantal God of Jesus Christ. The grace of God was now said "to ... shine forth"; and "peace" could bear the meaning "inner tranquility," although it also carries a more objective sense (732). Paul sees the readers as a seal on his apostleship, and thanks God for the success of the gospel. It is right that thanksgiving and prayer go together, especially in the case of ministers.

The faith of the readers was not a "dead" faith (Jas. 2:26), but one which resulted in labor and fervent love. Their hope was in Christ, in contrast to those who hope in merely human endeavor. They had hope in the sense of "patience with respect to an expected good," and patience in suffering, "waiting for God's Son from heaven." He continued: "All hope worketh patience ... fixed upon Christ" (732). Other hope rests upon this lower visible world. Poole asserts, "We cannot know election as it is in God's secret decree, but as made manifest in the fruits and effects of it" (733). This is how Paul knew that the readers were elect. The readers experienced "much assurance," because they assented to the truth of the gospel, triumphing over "the waves of all objections" (733). Poole, in spite of his Reformed and Puritan tradition, sees "power" as meaning that the gospel is confirmed by miracles. He did not simply slavishly follow Calvin.

## The Eighteenth Century

The nonconformist biblical exegete **Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) published his classic *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* (6 vols.) in 1708–10. He was unable to complete his commentary on Thessalonians, but left a more concise comment in his *Concise Commentary*. From this we can see his very practical application of this passage: "We should pray not only for ourselves, but for others also, remembering them without ceasing." He continues, "True

faith ... will work. It will affect both the heart and life. Faith works by love. It shows itself in love to God, and love to the neighbor” (on 1 Thess. 1:1–5). By this, he asserted, we know our election, and are raised up to heavenly things. Without the Holy Spirit, the word of God is merely a dead letter. Henry shows how readily a biblical passage may address a present reader.

The biblical expositions of **Johann Albrecht Bengel** (1687–1752), often reckoned among the Pietists, are a classic. He spoke of the “pure sweetness” of this Epistle, in which Paul needs no title. Paul writes “familiarly to the godly Thessalonians, who required no preface respecting his apostolic authority” (*Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, 796). Bengel declares, “Work is opposed to empty words, and in the singular signifies something lasting and effective.” He saw labor as “outward kindnesses,” in contrast to those “who evade all exertion for the sake of their own interests” (796). He warned against sloth. The Holy Spirit performed “his saving and miraculous operation” (*nec non miraculosa*, 797).

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88), John Wesley’s younger brother, was one of the greatest of the hymn-writers of the eighteenth century. The following hymn is based on Ephesians 6, but also reflects 1 Thess. 1:3 and 8 less directly:

But, above all, lay hold  
On faith’s victorious shield;  
Armed with that adamant and gold  
Be sure to win the field.

If faith surround your heart,  
Satan shall be subdued,  
Repelled his every fiery dart,  
And quenched with Jesu’s blood.

(Watson (ed.), *Anthology*, 178).

**John Newton** (1725–1807) was a former slave master who became a Christian, partly under the influence of George Whitefield, wrote on faith, experience, and prayer. Commenting on “unceasing prayer,” he wrote:

Even in the exercise of prayer by which we profess to draw near to the Lord, the consideration that his eye has little power to ... prevent our thoughts from wandering ... to the ends of the earth. What should we think of a person who, being admitted into the king’s presence, upon business of the greatest importance, should break off in the midst of his address, to pursue a butterfly? (*Works*)

**William Cowper** (1731–1800), who was closely associated with John Newton, also composed many poems and hymns. The following is taken from his poem

“Hope,” which speaks of a hope that is finally fulfilled at the last day, reflecting the main thrust of hope in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, not least in 1 Thess. 1:3:

These shall last when night has quenched the pole,  
And heav'n is all departed as a scroll:  
And when, as justice has long since decreed,  
This earth shall blaze, and a new world succeed,  
Then these thy glorious works, and they who share  
That hope which can alone exclude despair,  
Shall live exempt from weakness and decay,  
The brightest wonders of an endless day.

(*Poems*)

As J. R. Watson comments, “Cowper’s image ... is that of sunshine after rain” (*Anthology*, 223).

Some of Cowper’s hymns also presuppose the importance of faith. He wrote “God moves in a mysterious way” in 1773, shortly before suffering a breakdown. The sixth and final verse reads:

Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain;  
God is his own interpreter,  
And he will make it plain.

(Cowper, *Olney Hymns*)

## The Nineteenth Century

The Romantic poet **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792–1822), who with his second wife, Mary Shelley, lived an unconventional life, did not hold Christian views. Whereas biblical writers saw love as an act and habit of the will, Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, saw it as an expression of the imagination:

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination ... Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination. (“A Defence of Poetry,” 944–56)

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839), professor of biblical exegesis, wrote commentaries on several of the epistles. His commentary on Thessalonians was

published posthumously in 1840. He explains that Silvanus and Timothy, the co-authors, had accompanied Paul to Macedonia, but had at first remained behind in Beroea, and then followed him from there (Acts 17:14–15; *Commentary*, 383). He notes that the phrase “in God the Father” remains distinctive to 1 and 2 Thessalonians, anticipating Albert Schweitzer’s objections to the phrase. But this is perhaps understandable, since these two epistles emphasize “God” more than other Pauline epistles, except Romans. The “three cardinal virtues,” faith, love, and hope, occur here in this order, although in 1 Corinthians love is mentioned last to underline its importance (384). Love is not merely “a beneficent feeling,” but a power which is active in self-denial and exertion (384). The whole passage, Olshausen comments, is meant to paint “the independent manner in which the Christians in Thessalonica let Christianity become operative in them, and know how to uphold it against all attacks of the world” (385).

The poet **Alfred Tennyson** (1809–92) combined the Arthurian legend with Christian elements. In *The Coming of Arthur*, he wrote, “The King will follow Christ, and we, the King.” On continual prayer (1 Thess. 1:2–3) he wrote:

Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of. Therefore, let thy voice  
Rise like a fountain for me day and night.  
For what are men better than sheep or goats ...  
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer  
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?  
For so the whole round earth is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

(ll. 1414–22)

**Henry Alford** (1810–71), dean of Canterbury, published his *Greek Testament* (4 vols.) in 1857. He followed others in noting that the readers have received “a faith that had its outward effect on your lives; a love that spent itself in the service of others; a hope that was no mere transient feeling, but was content to wait for the things unseen when Christ should be revealed” (*Greek Testament*, 3.250). Election, Tennyson continues, “should not be softened down.” It involved the readers’ reception of the word, even if in much tribulation” (250–1). Both their joy and their tribulation constituted signs of their election. The Greek *plērōphoria* means *much confidence*, in contrast to many erroneous interpretations such as “fullness of spiritual gifts” (Turretin), or “fulfillment of the apostolic office” (Estius).

**Charles J. Ellicott** (1816–1905) became professor of divinity at Cambridge, and subsequently bishop of Gloucester. He believed that “the title had not

yet been assumed by Paul and his converts” (*Commentary*, 1). He saw some vocabulary as unique to Paul, and asserted that *labor* (Greek, *kopos*) certainly carries overtones of “toil” (6). Election refers to the sovereign decree of God. “In that” or “because” in v. 5 is causative, giving the reason for Paul’s knowledge (7). The reference to “power” (5) is climactic, not explanatory. Ellicott supports Calvin’s view that it is not miraculous powers, but *reality* (as Karl Barth later argues), or a matter of energy and effect. In v. 6 the readers imitate the common lifestyle of Paul and his co-workers, who founded the church (9).

**Gottlieb Lünemann** (1819–94) considered that Paul omitted an official title because of the “devoted love” which bound him to the readers (*Thessalonians*, 18). “Labour of love” denotes “the active labour of love, which shuns no toil or sacrifice, in order to minister to the wants of our neighbors, not a forbearing love,” which overlooks their faults (24). “Hope” is also “the constancy which suffers not itself to be overcome by obstacles.” Verse 5 concerns the power and confidence with which the gospel was preached (26). This is not a miraculous power, as Calvin also asserts (27). The next verse (v. 6) concerned the readers’ “receptivity for the preaching of the gospel” (29). The word “affliction” (Greek, *thlipsis*) naturally means “trials and sufferings” (30).

**Edward M. Bounds** (1835–1913), who published nine books on prayer, wrote: “Prayer promotes a spirit of devotion, while devotion is favorable to the best praying . . . Prayer thrives in the atmosphere of true devotion . . . Devotion engages the heart in prayer . . . The great lack of modern religion is a lack of devotion . . . a mere religious performance” (*Essentials of Prayer*, 10–11). Bounds said in the late nineteenth century much of what William Law had already said in the eighteenth century. But it relates to 1 Thess. 1:2 and to elsewhere in Thessalonians.

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) emphasized Paul’s writing to Christians in a context of pagan disgust at what he regarded as “the unbroken monotony of evil everywhere” (*Lectures Chiefly Expository*, 6). He wrote, “God had his chosen ones” (6). Again, he spoke of “the ceaseless, restless, enmity of the Jews,” whereas a more variable picture may be more accurate. Yet, for all its extravagance, his comment “The world was against them” (7) conveys something of what it felt like to be a persecuted or oppressed minority, whom others saw as endangering the Roman privileges of the city. Hutchison further comments on Paul’s thanksgiving for the readers: “It was a memory the fragrance of which pervaded his whole life, the comfort of which sweetened all his trials. It was the remembrance of ‘their faith, and love, and hope’ – the three graces of the renewed life” (19). All this, Hutchison declares, is intensely practical. The thanksgiving suggests an example to imitate; the readers’ faith, love and hope suggests “our own duty and dignity” (23–4).

## Paul's Reflection on His Visit: The Readers are an Example to Believers from Greece (1 Thess. 1:6b–10)

### Introduction and Overview

The readers' "welcome" (Greek, *dechomai*) demonstrates the warmth of reception offered to Paul and his fellow workers. He reflects on the warmth of reception offered to them. "Turning" (*epistrephein*) is more frequent in Acts than in Paul, but readily denotes the conversion of Gentiles. To call God "living and true" recalls Isa. 42:8; 45:5–7, 15, 18–24; and Jer. 10:10 (see 1 Cor. 8:4–6:29). In the early twentieth century "turned from idols to serve the true and living God" became widely established as a virtual summary of the earliest Christian preaching to the Gentiles (Weiss, *Earliest Christianity*, 2.435). To accept the gospel openly in a pagan city was to court not only derision, but opprobrium. As William Neil comments, "We simply cannot appreciate today what it must have cost in terms of family, friends, society, to become a follower of the Way" (*Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians*, 19–20).

The concept of Christians waiting for the Parousia has also lost much of its Pauline prominence in modern thought. As the readers wait, with faith, not sight, we find a clash between traditional exegesis from the church fathers up until today, and many mid-twentieth-century writers and some today. The work of J. A. T. Robinson, T. F. Glasson, and others led to the church's traditional stress on a *future* advent being interpreted in a complex, but also reductionist, way. By 1969, however, the tide may have begun to turn again. Arthur Moore tackled earlier scholarship head-on. He pointed out that many "modern scholars" argued that the eschatological theme was foreign to Jesus and "lacking in the earliest Christian preaching." Old Testament imagery concerning theophany was transferred to Christ, or Christologies allegedly became confused. Moore writes, "These explanations are particularly weak" (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 31). He argues this more fully in *The Parousia in the New Testament* (92–107, 160–74, 207–18).

B. S. Childs and George B. Caird strengthen this with their arguments on "broken" myth (Childs, *Myth and Reality*, 42; Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 243–71). The issue remains controversial, in spite of work by Beda Rigaux on Thessalonians (*Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, 195–280), and especially by Jürgen Moltmann (*Coming of God*, 6–29, 150–9, 226–319) and N. T. Wright (*Resurrection of the Son of God*, 209–77, 558–9). Ernest Best comments, "The belief that Jesus would return again from heaven . . . was common to primitive Christianity and is particularly emphasized in our epistles" (*Thessalonians*, 83).

There is a deliberate repetition of “God” in v. 10. Paul characteristically speaks of God’s *raising* (active voice) Christ (Rom. 8:11). God acts in the world from creation to judgment. On judgment, if a child is bent on self-destruction, a parent may be angered. A less loving parent might be indifferent to this behavior. Moltmann urges that a God who cannot suffer and feel cannot love either (*Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 38; see 21–60). Some regard the phrase “rescues us from the wrath that is coming” (Greek, *rhuomenon*, v. 10) as a reflection of an early apocalyptic view which Paul later abandons. But he uses the identical Greek word (*rhuomai*) in Rom. 7:24; 1 Cor. 1:10; and Col. 1:13 (see also 2 Thess. 3:2), and we have already cited Klaus Koch, J. Christiaan Beker, Alexandra Brown, and others, on the importance of apocalyptic for Paul and even for the church today.

## The Subapostolic and Patristic Era

**Polycarp** (c. 69–c. 155) begins in a similar way to Paul: “I have greatly rejoiced ... because you have followed the example of true love” (*Epistle to Philipppians* 1). On his way to martyrdom in Rome, **Ignatius of Antioch** (c. 35–107) urges, “Permit me to be an imitator (Greek, *mimētēs*) of the sufferings of my God” (*To the Romans* 6.3; also in Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 1.234–5; see also v. 7).

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) explains how revelation can act like a physician, to cure the whole world of suffering and evil (see v. 8; Clement, *The Instructor* 1.1, 2; ANF 2.1.2). **Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) speaks of “the crime of idolatry,” referring to the golden calf and the Ba’alim (1 Kings 12:25–33), and quotes 1 Thess. 1:9–10 explicitly: “You turned from idols to serve the living and true God” (*On the Resurrection* 24.1; ANF 3.562). Here he uses the passage to argue for the resurrection; and to denounce idolatry (*An Answer to the Jews* 1; ANF 3.152).

**Origen of Alexandria** (c. 185–c. 254) apparently does not comment on 1 Thess. 1:6b–10 in his extant writings, but writes much on the Holy Spirit (v. 6b). He rightly associates the Spirit with Christ, who is given openly “after the ascension of Christ to heaven,” when Christ gave gifts to humankind. But (against Marcion) the “one Spirit” was also active in the prophets and the apostles, as well as most notably “in the last days” (*De Principiis* 2.7.2; ANF 4.285). The Holy Spirit is wisdom and knowledge, and the Paraclete of the gospel, but he is also a Person of majesty (*De Principiis* 2.7.3–4). “He bestows consolation upon the souls to whom He openly reveals the apprehension of spiritual knowledge” (2.7.4; 286). The Holy Spirit is divine, because he manifests divine attributes (*Commentary on John* 2.77). The Holy Spirit, as Paul argues in 1 Thess. 1:6b, gives “comfort and joy of heart” (*De Principiis* 2.7.4; ANF 4.286).

**Cyprian** of Carthage (d. 258) suffered during the Decian persecution, and was forced to flee into exile. He wrote that persecution arises to “prove” or to

test Christians, and cites Paul's words in Rom. 5:2–5: "We glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulations work patience," which is broadly parallel with 1 Thess. 1:6–7 (*Treatise* 10.9; ANF 5.501).

**Athanasius** (c. 296–373) saw idolatry as the origin of the human decline from communion with God (*Contra Gentes* 10.3; NPNF2 4.9). The essence of sin is a rejection of contemplation of God, and humanly constructed idols distract people from God, so they need to turn from them to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9). The word of God goes forth to the world because it is not simply the word of man (*Discourse* 1.8.28; 2.18.35).

**Basil of Caesarea** (c. 330–379) quotes v. 9, "to turn from idols to serve the living and true God" as summing up the "turning" in baptismal faith and liturgy in the threefold name of the Holy Trinity (*On the Holy Spirit* 10.26; NPNF2 8.17). **Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 330–395), the younger brother of Basil, explicitly quotes the same passage, but for a different purpose. He is discussing the accusation of Eunomius that he confuses reality and non-reality or mere appearance. Christians, Gregory asserts, flee from superstitious error and from idols to embrace the truth and "to serve the true and living God" (*Against Eunomius* 2.4; NPNF2 5.105; and *Orations on the Holy Light* 39.8).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) comments on v. 6b, "Such is the joy of the Spirit. In return for the things which appear to be grievous, it [or he] brings out delight ... The Spirit did not forsake you" (*Homily* 1; NPNF1 13.325). He notes the readers' status as examples (v. 7), and observes that they so shone that they "became teachers of those who received [the word]" before them (*Hom.* 1; 325). On v. 8, he compared the sounding forth of the word to "the sound of a loud trumpet" (1 Thess. Hom. 2; NPNF1 13.327). Paul calls them examples to those who *already* believed. Their zeal did not exempt them from the need of Paul's prayers; we can never pass beyond the need for others to pray for us, as many biblical examples suggest (vv. 7–8). Chrysostom adds that the Macedonians were always ready to celebrate good news, as they did over the exploits of Alexander the Great. The readers "readily" turned from idols (v. 9), to await "both the Resurrection ... the second Coming, the Judgment" (*Homily* 2; NPNF1 13.328). On Phil. 1:22, Chrysostom expounds Paul's longing to depart and to be with Christ, yet also his desire to fulfill his calling on earth. He wrote, "Nothing can be more blessed than the spirit of Paul ... Nothing is more noble. We all shudder at death ... [Paul says] 'To depart is very far better' ... Oh! That spirit of Paul!" (*Homilies on the Philippians* 4; NPNF1 13.198–9).

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) stresses that the readers do not seek glory from humankind, nor was this Paul's intention. Christian believers suffer abuse. Yet through the cross, Theodore asserts, accepting suffering and tribulation will bring our salvation. To accept what happens to us in a

good spirit will enable us to endure it with joy (*cum gaudio*) from the Holy Spirit. All will then know and admire such suffering on behalf of faith and our teaching, as the readers in truth recognize their Lord, whom God raised from the dead, and who will come to us from heaven (*In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, 5–6).

**Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430) speaks of the readers’ suffering and their joy in the Holy Spirit, and of their reputation in every place (*Expositions*, 419–20). **Augustine** (354–430) recognizes that “hope” endures until “the day breaks, and the shadows flee away” (*Confessions* 14.15). He asserts, “Every man shall see the Christ of God” (*City of God* 22.29; NPNF1 2.508).

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) remarks that the Thessalonians’ ardor for their faith is celebrated everywhere, “and has prompted many to zeal for godliness” (*Letters*, 109). More than this, Paul gives them the highest honor by calling them not only imitators of the apostles, but also imitators of Christ himself (108). God has “freed us from the deception of the idols,” who are not “true” deities, Paul asserts, and “bade us look forward to the second coming of the Only begotten . . . that was raised from the dead, being immune to suffering” (109). Christ’s identity remains the same after the ascension. The readers are “to wait for his Son from heaven, whom God raised from the dead, even Jesus” (*Letters*, 146; NPNF2 3.321).

## The Medieval Period

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) reminds us that Paul aims to replace sadness with joy by reminding the readers that suffering is part of imitating the Lord through sharing in the cross, which brings salvation. Their joy can be sustained by the Spirit. Their reputation as Christians has already spread. They must also be mindful of the resurrection, and their release from the effects of sin (*Epistolas B. Pauli*, PL 102.542–3). In his *Sermon on the Day of Pentecost*, Rabanus declared, “My beloved brothers, the more we receive the joys of today’s celebration, the more we seek for it, and the more eagerly we drink its cooling draught, and the more we burn with thirst for it.” Pentecost set the first Christians on fire with Christ’s love, “and made them steadfast amid the persecutions of the Jews, abounding in heavenly joy” (*Five Sermons*, 305).

The anonymous hymn **Veni Creator** is also ascribed to the ninth century:

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire  
And lighten with celestial fire;  
Thou the anointing Spirit art,  
Who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.

Thy blessed unction from above  
Is comfort, life, and fire of love;  
Enable with perpetual light  
The dullness of our blinded sight.  
(tr. John Cosin)

**Rupert of Deutz** (c. 1075–1129), a monastic theologian, wrote on allegorical interpretation and on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He endorsed the apocalyptic notion of a succession of empires in Daniel, and the oppression of the faithful. Abbot Cuno asked him for a treatise on the victory of God’s Word. Rupert wrote, “Great and powerful is God’s Word, who has prevailed ... It was a mighty struggle and mighty were its events ... [But] the will of God shall prosper ... By the seal of the cross ... he [Christ] is expected to return to judge the living and the dead” (“On the Victory of God’s Word,” in McCracken and Cabaniss (eds.), *Early Mediaeval Theology*, 230, 281–2).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) typically uses other scriptures to shed light on a given piece of scripture. In his *Lectures* on 1 Thessalonians alone he has 340 scriptural citations (Paddison, *Theological Hermeneutics and 1 Thessalonians*, 74). Paul’s allusion to *example*, and to *joy through suffering* comes together in several passages: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” The theme of imitation or example becomes a challenge. Aquinas writes, “You are our imitators to such an extent that you can be imitated by others.” Therefore he cites Macedonia and Achaia. The implication is clear: would any want to imitate us? “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works” (Matt. 5:16; Aquinas, *Commentary*, 10).

Aquinas quotes from the Old Testament and Apocrypha: “Return to me with your whole heart” (Joel 2:12), and “Do not delay to turn to the Lord” (Sir. 5:7). The reference to idols finds a parallel in 1 Cor. 12:2 and Rom. 1:25. The words “living” and “true” serve to exclude idolatry. God is the living God (Deut. 32:40). The readers may rightly expect a reward. They await Christ’s coming. Aquinas refers to Luke 12:16 and Isa. 30:18, “Blessed are those who wait for him.” We await the final resurrection (Rom. 8:11; Phil. 3:21) and freedom from punishment to be declared at the last judgment. Believers are those who have heard and obeyed the warning “to flee from the wrath to come” (Matt. 3:7; Aquinas, *Commentary*, 11).

**John Wycliffe** (c. 1333–84), who prepared the way for the Reformation, extended the concept of “idolatry” to include the view of the Eucharist implied

by transubstantiation. To say that the cup contains the real blood of Christ is virtually to say, “Why not commit idolatry?” “When we see the host, we ought to believe not that it is itself the body of Christ, but that the body of Christ is sacramentally concealed in it . . . When this error of idolatry has been destroyed, we can worship God more purely” (*Eucharist*, in Spinka (ed.), *Advocates of Reform*, 64). Wycliffe thus gives the phrase “turned from idols” a meaning that Paul could not have envisaged, but expands the notion to include a new situation.

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) argued as a general principle that Paul’s stress on suffering and on the dynamic spread of the gospel sits ill with the Rome of his time, with its fine buildings and the wealth of its clergy. He writes, “In popery I saw that all men gave abundantly to the building and maintaining of goodly temples . . . the riches of bishops and the rest of the clergy did increase” (*Galatians* 547; WA 40, 2.155). Luther also appreciates that Romans 5 and 8 address the issue of suffering and joy. In Romans 8, God gives the Holy Spirit, so that our sufferings are far surpassed. Luther expounds the dialectic of tribulation and joy from Hebrews 12:2–11. He asserts, “We glory in our tribulations” (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Early Theological Works*, 233).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) argues that Paul’s use of the Greek *typos* matches the Latin *exemplar*. The Thessalonians, he observes, had been so courageous that other believers borrowed from them a rule of constancy. But *pattern* does not necessarily imply uniformity: “There were as many *patterns* as there were individuals” (*Commentary*, 21). The work and power of the Holy Spirit was involved in their reception of the gospel. Calvin’s phrasing recalls 1 Cor. 2:1–5. He continues, “Although not all worship idols, all are nevertheless addicted to idolatry and are immersed in blindness and madness” (22). All the same, “the kindness of God” rescues believers from such effects of idolatry and sin. Further, “It is necessary that we be converted to God before we can serve him” (22). To serve the living and true God (v. 9) is “the purpose and effect of genuine conversion” (22). Idols are dead and worthless. Believers, Calvin writes, must be stirred up to the hope of eternal life “to wait for his Son” (v. 10); otherwise the world will quickly draw us to itself. He comments, “As it is only confidence in the divine goodness that induces us to serve God, so it is only the expectation of final redemption that keeps us from giving way and losing heart” (23). Without Christ, we are thrown into despair. “Deliverance will become apparent on the last day.” “God’s wrath and everlasting destruction are impending over the human race, inasmuch as everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s glory” (23; Rom. 3:23).

This entirely accords with Calvin's theology in his *Institutes*. He asserts, appealing to the orthodox and especially to Augustine: "We bring an innate corruption from the very womb ... (Psalm 51:5) ... All of us ... came into the world tainted with the contagion of sin ... in God's sight defiled and polluted" (*Institutes* 2.1.5; 2.1.8–11). But Christ as Prophet, Priest, King, and Mediator, allows us "to seek righteousness ... life and salvation." "By his death, sin was abolished; by his resurrection, righteousness was restored and life renewed" (*Institutes* 2.17.3).

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) discusses idols and idolatry. In his *Works* 43.2 he considers the idol as representative of what is "conceived only in the mind or framed by the hands ... and every false divinity, whether it be the pure figment of the human brain, or any thing existing among the creatures of God" (*Disputation* 23.2; Arminius, *Works*, 341). He explicitly appeals to 1 Thess. 1:9.

**Estius** (1542–1613) speaks of joy in the Holy Spirit, of "the love of Christ" and "the hope of glory" (*Omnes Epistolas* 2.553). The readers became an example not only to all in Macedonia, but "to the faithful in every place," as Ambrosiaster commented (554). The latter is a hyperbole. The readers have turned to God from idolatrous likenesses (*a simulacris*) of him (v. 9). Idolatry was a particular sin of Gentiles. But now they have encountered truth, as Erasmus observed. Therefore they now await Jesus the Son from heaven.

**Jeremy Taylor** (1613–67), chaplain to King Charles I, and best known for his *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, wrote: "It remains, that we who are alive, should so live, and ... attend the coming day of the Lord, that we neither be surprised, nor leave our duties imperfect, nor our sins uncanceled, nor our persons unreconciled, nor God unappeased; but that, when we descend to our graves, we may rest in the bosom of the Lord" (*Holy Dying*, in *Selected Writings*, 115). Also in *Holy Dying* he wrote that if we are not to fear death, we must try to be in love with "the felicities of saints and angels," and that "above there is a country better than ours."

**Thomas Vincent** (1634–78), the nonconformist preacher and author of *Fire and Brimstone in Hell, to Burn the Wicked* (1670), cited Ps. 11:6, "Upon the wicked He shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and a horrible tempest, this shall be the portion of their cup," and proceeded to comment:

The flames and fiery streams, which were rained down from heaven upon Sodom and Gomorrah formerly, and which issued forth from the earth in the eruptions of Mount Aetna lately, are but shadows of the future flames, and like painted fire in comparison, with the streams of fire and brimstone, which in hell shall burn the wicked eternally. For as the glory of heaven (while we are in the dark vale of this world) does far exceed all conception, and therefore cannot be set forth in full by any description; but as one says, whoever attempts to speak of an heavenly state, while himself is upon the earth, his discourse of that must needs be like the dark dreams and imaginations of a child. (Vincent, *Fire and Brimstone*, intro. to ch. 1; see also v. 10)

Vincent continues:

There is nothing that hell is described by in the whole book of the Scripture so much as by fire, and sometimes by fire mingled with brimstone. It is called fire in Matt. 3:10. Every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire; hell-fire, Mark 9:47. It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hellfire; a furnace of fire in Matt. 13:42, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire. It is called a place where the wicked shall be tormented with fire and brimstone, Rev. 14:10. And he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone, in the presence of the holy angels (Revelation 21:8), and shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. (ch. 3)

In another of Vincent's works, *The Vain Securities of the Wicked*, also published in 1670, he writes: "God will meet you as a bear bereaved of her cubs, and rend your heart, or like a roaring lion, and tear you in pieces; when there shall be none to deliver. God will take you into his hand, and throw you out of his presence into the bottomless gulf of unquenchable burnings. I think this should awaken you. ... Consider the everlastingness of hell-fire, and your torment which there you must endure, if you be found in the number of unbelievers."

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) suggested that the example of the readers "influenced all the believers both of Macedonia and Achaia," otherwise it is difficult to see why Paul would have mentioned it (*Commentary*, 733). Paul's allusion to "every place" is not hyperbole, but report. For Thessalonica was an eminent place. In far places the word is heard like an echo, as merchants, travelers, or letters carry the news (see 1 Cor. 14:8–9; Gal. 6:6). "Every place" means "here and there, up and down in the world" (*Commentary*, 733). The effects have been seen in everyday life, in spite of the fact that persecution followed. The readers' "turning from idols" showed how they forsook their former lifestyle. They now saw the folly of worshiping man-made constructions. Poole compares the "Papist" concern with "images" (734). God is the living God (v. 9). Christ is Son of God "by eternal generation," as Athanasius and Basil urged (734). In their affliction, they waited for the coming of Christ "as a deliverer and rewarder ... They believed that he was gone to heaven and would come again" (734). A "drop" of God's wrath shall not fall on them. The Greek *rhuomenon* (v. 10) signifies a powerful rescue.

The Puritan theologian and preacher **Thomas Watson** (c. 1620–86) typically wrote of Christ, that he "rescues us from the wrath that is coming," in 1 Thess. 1:10. Humankind are "heirs of wrath ... If a man be fallen under the King's displeasure, will he labour to re-ingratiate himself into his favor? Oh let us flee from the wrath of God! And whither should we fly, but to Jesus Christ. There is none else to shield off the wrath of God from us ... 1 Thess. 1:10"

(“Man’s Misery by the Fall,” *Body of Divinity*, 112). Only Christ can save from sin and from wrath (“Christ’s Exaltation,” *Body of Divinity*, 148).

## The Eighteenth Century

**August Hermann Francke** (1663–1727), a well-known leader of the Pietist movement, wrote that “resurrection from natural death ... at the Last Day” is well enough understood, when not just the physical body but “the whole man ... may be qualified for the rewards and punishments of the next [life]” (see 1 Thess. 1:10; Francke, *A Sermon on the Resurrection* [1732], in Erb [ed.], *Pietists*, 130).

**John Gill** (1697–1771), a Strict Baptist minister, published a commentary on the whole Bible (1746–66), wrote on the Hebrew language, and produced shorter works, including ones on the fate of the wicked and the bliss of the saints. His work on the fate of the wicked shows what “to flee from the coming wrath” (v. 10) meant to him personally:

The place of torment is bounded by a great gulf, so that there is no passing from that to a state of happiness; which gulf is no other than the eternal and immutable decree of God, which can never be disannulled, but will remain fixed and unalterable. The heathens themselves represent Hades and Tartarus, by which they mean the same as hell, as so closely locked and shut up, that there is no return from thence; and as strongly fortified with iron towers and gates, with walls and adamantine pillars, as impregnable, and never to be broke[n] through ... The veracity of God makes eternal punishment for sin necessary. He has threatened sin, the breach of his law, with eternal death; for such is the demerit of it; and his truth and faithfulness are engaged to fulfill the threatening, unless a compensation is made for sin committed. Not to punish sin would not be doing justice to [God] himself, and to the glory of his Majesty; it would be a denying himself, a concealing his perfections, and suffering his supreme authority over his creatures to be subject to contempt. (Gill, “Of the Final State of the Wicked in Hell,” *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* 1.7.10)

Gill, however, complemented this with a picture of the final blessedness of the saints:

It will consist in the enjoyment of the greatest glory, both in soul and body, beyond all present conception and expression. There will be a glory revealed in the saints, which is beyond all comparison; and a glory put upon them that is inconceivable; a glory upon their souls, which lie in perfect purity in them, in having the righteousness of Christ upon them, and the shining robes of light and bliss: a glory upon their bodies, which will be raised glorious, powerful, spiritual, and incorruptible, and ever continue; as Christ will appear in glory, they will appear in glory with him ... Sorrow and sighing shall flee away

(Isa. 35:10). (Gill, “Of the Final State of the Saints in Heaven,” *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* 1.7.11)

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88), John’s younger brother and celebrated hymn-writer, composed a number of well-known hymns on the future coming of Christ. One of the best known, first published in 1758, includes the following verses:

Lo! He comes with clouds descending,  
Once for favored sinners slain;  
Thousand, thousand Saints attending  
Swell the triumph of His train:  
Alleluia!  
God appears, on earth to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him  
Robed in dreadful majesty;  
Those who set at nought and sold him,  
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,  
Deeply wailing,  
Shall the true Messiah see.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 51)

American theologian and philosopher **Jonathan Edwards** (1703–58), who was associated with the Great Awakening, wrote: “Let not the precious days and years of youth slip away without improvement. A time of the strivings of God’s Spirit is more precious than other time. Then God is near; and we are directed, in Isaiah 55:6. ‘To seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call upon him while he is near.’ (2 Corinthians 6: 2).” He continues: “Spend not such opportunities unprofitably, nor in such a manner that you will not be able to give a good account thereof to God. Waste them not away wholly in unprofitable visits, or useless diversions or amusements ... You have need to improve every talent, advantage, and opportunity, to your utmost, while time lasts” (Edwards, *The Precious Importance of Time*).

**John Newton** (1725–1807) and **William Cowper** (1731–1800) refer to the return of Christ in a number of hymns. One verse of Cowper’s devotional hymn reads:

Thou shalt see my glory soon,  
When the work of grace is done;  
Partner of my throne shalt be,  
Say, poor sinner, lov’st thou me?  
(*Olney Hymns*, 75)

John Newton writes:

The Saviour, whom I then shall see  
With new-admiring eyes,  
Already has prepared for me  
A mansion in the skies.  
(*Olney Hymns*, 595)

## The Nineteenth Century

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) commented on vv. 7–8 in 1840: “Christianity makes no . . . Stoical demands. Spiritual joy did not exclude, but included, sorrow at the blindness of the men who persecuted God in those that are his” (*Commentary*, 386). The readers could become a “pattern” only when their faith was known (387). Paul spoke not only of outward entrance in v. 9, but of “access which St. Paul found to their hearts” (388).

Among the varied essays of Victorian writer **Walter Bagehot** (1826–77) was one on the House of Lords, *The English Constitution* (1867), which redefined “idols” (1 Thess. 1:10). Bagehot saw *money* as the chief *idol* of Victorian England:

The order of nobility is of great use, too, not only in what it creates, but in what it prevents. It prevents the rule of wealth – the religion of gold. This is the obvious and natural idol of the Anglo-Saxon. He is always trying to make money; he reckons everything in coin; he bows down before a great heap, and sneers as he passes a little heap. He has a natural instinctive admiration of wealth for its own sake. And within good limits the feeling is quite right. So long as we play the game of industry vigorously and eagerly . . . We shall of necessity respect and admire those who play successfully, and a little despise those who play unsuccessfully. (Bagehot, “The House of Lords,” *The English Constitution*)

This accords with the verdict of **Friedrich Schleiermacher** (1768–1834) that “These proud Islanders . . . know no watchword but *gain* and *enjoyment* . . . Their worldly wisdom [is] a false jewel . . . They are never in earnest with anything that goes beyond palpable utility” (*On Religion*, 9–10).

In 1884, **John Hutchison** (n.d.) observed “Confronted by the steadfast zeal of his converts, he [Paul] could say, “You are our glory and joy” (*Lectures Chiefly Expository*, 43). These Christians

left their name,  
A light – a landmark on the cliffs of fame.

Paul often looks for a “door opened by the Lord” for the gospel message (2 Cor. 2:12; see also Col. 4:3, “a door of utterance”). The word *idols*, in the plural, stood in contrast to the one, single, true God (44–5). Hutchison wrote, “Service without its accompanying hope would merge into dry and formal routine. Hope without its service . . . would press into indolent sentiment, or into restless and hysterical excitement” (46). The sufferings of the present are a cross that leads to something better, and Christians are delivered from the wrath of God:

Where grief and joy, disjointed,  
The true and false intertwined,  
Each to its destined place  
At the stern sentence gone,  
Shall dwell alone.

**James Denney** (1856–1917) stressed that Paul’s reminiscence concerned not only the delivery of the message (*Thessalonians*, 43), but evidence of its effects. This rests “not on the self-consciousness of the preachers” but on the objective change of life, and on God’s truth and faithfulness (44). He also stressed the unity of God, as the starting point for having some idea of his character, and of being able to enjoy a relationship with him (55). This includes moral integrity, obedience, and worship. Yet this passage also referred to the resurrection. Denney wrote, “There had been nothing like it before” (58). Then Paul spoke of the Parousia: “That attitude of expectation is the bloom, as it were, of Christian character. Without it, there is something lacking” (59). Yet it is often, today, Denney argues, an underestimated truth. This is even more pointed when we look at the phrase “God’s wrath.” This certainly did not mean “intemperate rage” (62). But it is “no empty name” (63). Denney suggests that this concept gives depth to the perfect work of Christ, not least on the cross.

# 1 Thessalonians

2:1–8

## **Paul's Autobiographical Reflections and Defense**

The whole of the first chapter functions as an extended thanksgiving form, and in this body of the letter Paul formulates his general purpose and content in 2:1–3:13. Various writers have divided this section in different ways, partly depending on their primary interest. Most see 2:1–12 as a self-contained section of autobiographical reflections and defense.

## Introduction and Overview

Any Christian leader with a sense of responsibility and a deeply caring pastoral heart would want to explain why he had departed from his converts so quickly. In spite of the circumstances, some might suggest that Paul had left them in the lurch. In SNTS seminars on 1 Thessalonians in 1996–8, six major papers focused on 1 Thess. 2:1–12 as a virtual unity, and discussed its context, function, and background (Donfried and Beutler (eds.), *The Thessalonians Debate*, 31–131). Donfried rightly sees this passage as a “*speech-act*.” In *saying* something, it *does* something. He also claims that it has affinities with epideictic rhetoric. The first 16 verses of chapter 2, he claims, are “neither apologetic nor polemic. Rather [they] recount[s] the *relationship* established between Paul and the Thessalonians during the time of his founding visit” (5). However, to call it a “friendship letter” (6) does not provide an exclusive alternative to its constituting an apologetic. While Donfried is broadly right, this does not suggest that these verses are not *also* apologetic.

Traugott Holtz rightly underlines its character as *apologetic*. The issue lay not simply in Paul’s departure and absence, but in “that wandering Christian preachers could in actuality appear to pagan observers to be interchangeable with popular Sophists” (“On the Background of 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12,” 78; see also 69–80; Vos, “A Response to Traugott Holtz”; and Holtz, *Der Erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, 15–31). Indeed he allows for Otto Merk’s essay defining this passage as a theological study, since 2:17 offers a reason why the letter was written, namely Paul’s absence from Thessalonica. We may readily grant that 2:13–20 complements 2:1–12, and note that Paul’s “many fervent attempts to see them again have been thwarted” (Merk, “1 Thessalonians 1:1–12,” 91).

Any pastor who is concerned that his community of converts has been “orphaned” will wish to write an *apologia*, a friendship letter, and a theological follow-up. Merk (again rightly) concludes: “These verses . . . are . . . to be understood in the light of the milieu of itinerant preachers” (104, esp. on 2:6). We may also note that in these verses Abraham J. Malherbe has convincingly argued that Paul’s analogy, “we were gentle among you like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children” (1 Thess. 2:7), reflects the Cynic philosopher’s stress on sincerity and integrity as against a Sophistic emphasis on rhetoric and double-talk (Malherbe, “Gentle as a Nurse”; *Paul and Thessalonians*, 9, 18–33, and throughout; and *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 140–53).

F. F. Bruce sums up the three subsections of 2:1–12 in a memorable way: the missionaries’ visit (2:1–4); the missionaries’ behavior (2:5–8); and the missionaries’ example (2:9–12). This provides an excellent way of mapping Paul’s thought (*Pauline Circle*, 3).

One further theme invites and deserves comment. This arises not only from Paul's references to sincerity, integrity, and truth, but also from his repudiation of audience-pleasing flattery. In their study of Corinth and 1 Corinthians, Stephen M. Pogoloff (*Logos and Sophia*) and Andrew D. Clarke (*Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth*) make much play of the role of "audience-pleasing rhetoric" among other itinerant orators or Sophist preachers. Pogoloff cites the Roman orator Quintilian's view that in a provincial city such as Corinth (or Thessalonica), rhetoricians often speak in such a way that "Every effusion is greeted with a storm of ready-made applause ... The result is vanity and empty self-sufficiency ... [They] become intoxicated by the wild enthusiasm" (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2.9–12; Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia*, 136). Elsewhere Quintilian complains, "They seek to gain the reputation of speaking with greater rigour than the trained actor ... They shout ... with uplifted hand ... panting and gesticulating wildly" (2.11.7–12; 188). Seneca criticizes those who are concerned "to win approval for yourself rather than for the case" (*Controversiae* 9.1; Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia*, 176). Quintilian speaks of the audience standing up or leaping from seats "in the expression of their applause" (2.2.9).

Clarke comments, "A primary aim of those who sought personal advancement was the pursuit of esteem and praise" (*Secular and Christian Leadership*, 25). This became worse for those who sought patronage. Paul distances himself as far as possible from such preachers. As John Moores and others argue, such rhetoric turns the gospel "upside down" (*Wrestling with Rationality in Paul*, 134). Paul therefore carefully expounds the nature, aims, and effects of Christian preaching.

## The Patristic Era

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) quotes in full: "This the blessed Paul most clearly pointed out when he said, When we might have been burdensome as the apostles of Christ, we were gentle (Greek, *ēpioi*) among you, as a nurse cherishes her children" (1 Thess. 2:6–7; Clement, *The Instructor* 1.5; ANF 2.214). He continues: "The child is therefore gentle (*ēpios*), and therefore more straightforward ... which is the basis of simplicity and truth" (1:5; 214). The word infant or babe (Greek, *to nēpion*) does not refer to a silly person, but to one who is gentle and quiet. We must plant the power of persuasion tenderly, "mild and free of strain" (1:5; 214). This reflects Paul's strategy of preaching, which is devoid of deceit or flattery, unlike that of some itinerant Sophist preachers (1 Thess. 2:3–4; see also 1 Cor. 2:1–5; 2 Cor. 4:2–6).

Clement then repeats the entire thought in his *Stromata*. Speaking of preaching at the Eucharist, he quotes Paul, “At no time did we use flattering words ... nor a cloak of covetousness. God is witness. We sought no glory from man ... But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherishes her children” (1 Thess. 2:5–7; *Stromata* 1.1; ANF 2.300). He also adds a relevant quotation from 2 Cor. 6:4, 10, 11: “In everything approving ourselves as the servants of God; as poor, yet making many rich ...” He compares 1 Tim. 5:21, “Do nothing by partiality” (*Stromata* 1.1; ANF 2.300). Towards the end of the *Stromata*, Clement applies the principle to all Christians. Some, he says, have little self-control. He declares, “Self-restraint is the basis of knowledge.” In Paul this amounts to “as not pleasing men, but God” (1 Thess. 2:4; *Stromata* 7.12; ANF 2.543). Clement captures the spirit of 1 Thess. 2:1–8, making the appeal found in Paul, “God is our witness” (1 Thess. 2:5). He brings an added sensitivity from his regard for “true” philosophy.

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 235) defends Paul’s consistency with reference to this passage. All the epistles of Paul, he urges, defend modesty, charity, and sanctity, and attack luxury and indulgence. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “For our consolation [was] not of seduction, nor of impurity” (1 Thess. 2:3; *On Modesty* 17; ANF 4.92). Tertullian sees Paul’s renunciation of the deceit and trickery to which some itinerant Sophist preachers resort.

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) provides another reference to “as a nurse tenderly cares ...” Thereafter, like Clement of Alexandria, Origen sees the “perfect” person as one who is humble and “little,” like a child. Even an apostle or a bishop should be like a nurse, caring tenderly for her children, just as Jesus stated that angels guard children (Origen, *Commentary of Matthew*, sect. 29; ANF 10.492).

**Ambrosiaster** (d. c. 384) provides the first extant running commentary on 1 Thess. 2:1–8. He notes that Paul recalls the affliction, distress, and opposition which he suffered both at Philippi and Thessalonica. But he and his co-workers did not fear to speak. Ambrosiaster refers to the Acts account of the slave-girl whom Paul exorcised (Acts 16:16–18). This brought persecution upon them (Acts 16:19–24), but it also found them stronger in their prophetic preaching (“*fortior ... audit praedicare nec loqui timet*”), not least in the hope promised by God (Ambrosiaster, *In Epistolas Paulinas* 3.215). False “apostles” might preach with guile and deception (*dolo et fallacia praedicabant*), but in spite of persecution Paul will have nothing to do with this method. He preaches Christ, without favor, and “from the heart.” Unlike the false apostles, he rejects any motivation of greed or flattery (2:3–5). He aimed at “modesty” or “purity” (2:6–7; 216).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) addresses all of this passage. Paul’s preaching was more than *human* speech. Paul shows what genuine preaching involves: “miracles” and “the zeal and fervour of those who received [the message]”

(*Homilies on Thessalonians 2*; NPNF1 13.328). Even arriving “fresh from great dangers, and deaths, and strife,” Paul declares, “We waxed bold in our God” (*Homily 2*; 328). Chrysostom compares 1 Cor. 2:3. “Preaching is Divine ... if it were not so, it would be a deceit, (and) we should not have endured so many dangers.” But even if Paul does encounter persecution, future hope sustains him. If his preaching were mere rhetorical deceit, Paul and his colleagues would give it up. They are “not seeking honours that are from men,” but to be pleasing to God.

Paul’s motto is that of restraint, honesty, and forbearance, as 2 Cor. 10:10 and 11:20 would imply. He explained in 2:7–8, “we were gentle as a nurse ...” Chrysostom comments, “We exhibited nothing that was offensive or troublesome ... Does a nurse flatter that she may obtain glory? Does she ask money of her little children? Is she offensive or burdensome to them?” (*Homily 2*; ANF 13.330). Paul insists, “We would willingly have given our souls for you, because we were vehemently attached to you.” Chrysostom comments, “Nothing can be sweeter than such love ... A faithful friend is the medicine of life (*Ecclus.* 6.16) ... A friend is more to be longed for than the light” (*Hom.* 2; ANF 13.331). Preaching the gospel has been planted in heaven. Almost anything can be tolerated, provided that we share it with a friend. Chrysostom’s comments point to Donfried’s insistence that this is a “friendship letter,” but also to more. He comments on the Acts account of Paul’s visit (*Homilies on Acts 37*; NPNF1 11.228–39).

**Augustine** (354–430) includes a number of references to this passage, especially his repeated use of the analogy, “like a nurse caring tenderly for her own children” (1 Thess. 2:7). He exhorts catechumens not to weary of the exercise of instruction and generosity, citing as one motivation the love of Christ. Paul asserts that “the love of Christ constrains us ...” (2 Cor. 5:13–14). How, then, can we find instruction in the faith irksome? Paul became, like Christ, “a little child in the midst of us (and) like a nurse cherishing his children” (1 Thess. 2:7; *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed* 10.15; NPNF1 3.293–4). Augustine also addresses those monks who adopted a position like the “disorderly” in 2 Thessalonians 2. They were supposedly too “spiritual” to work for their living. Augustine opposes their arrogance. Paul became “weak” to minister to the “weak.” In 1 Thess. 2:5–7 he says, “We made ourselves small among you, even as a nurse cherishes her children ... Neither at any time did we use flattering words ...” (*On the Work of Monks* 13; NPNF1 3.510).

In his *Confessions* Augustine uses the analogy of the nurse again. Christians, he reflects, may restrain their affection to God by loving the world, whereas Paul declares, “Be not conformed to this world; but be renewed in your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Human people must be conformed to the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). This does not mean being “permanently immature believers

fed on milk (1 Cor. 3:1–2) and cherished as if by a nurse (1 Thess. 2:7)” (*Confessions* 13.23.32; *Confessions*, tr. Chadwick, 292). This particular quotation simply borrows the analogy, without also borrowing Paul’s line of thought. Paul cherishes his own converts, not leaving the task of nursing to others (*On the Psalms* 50.27; NPNF1 8.188). Then in his *Homily* 9 on 1 John 4:17–21 he fully returns to Paul’s meaning. There is no fear in love (1 Thess. 2:2; *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of St. John*, *Homily* 9.1; NPNF1 7.513).

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) writes on 1 Thess. 2:1–2: “The witness of the sufferings is sufficient to demonstrate the truth of the message: those intent on deception adopt a disguise ... This is the reason why the divine apostle made mention of the imprisonment and scourging in Philippi and his confidence afterwards ... He foresaw the value of the hardships” (*Commentary* 2.109–10). Theodoret continues that the apostle’s preaching is not like a “poet’s fables,” which are full of falsity. Paul does not use guile to ensnare his hearers. For the gospel is a trust. God is a witness to how Paul preached.

The fathers of the church thus agree that, as accords with his ministry in Corinth, Paul has no interest in audience-pleasing language, just as he rejects any motive of greed or self-gain. He made no demands on the community.

## The Medieval Period

**Bede the Venerable** of Jarrow (c. 673–735) cites Augustine’s use of the “nurse” analogy in 2:7, but comments: “[Paul] did not say ‘mother.’ Mothers are sometimes either more indulgent or less loving toward their children ... He called himself *a nurse* because he was nourishing them, and he called them *his own children* because he bore them. He said, ‘My children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you’ (Gal. 4:19). He bears them just as he bears the Church” (*Excerpts from the Works of St. Augustine*, 285).

**Alain (or Alan) of Lille** (d. 1202) made an outstanding contribution to preaching in the twelfth century after some six centuries of relative silence after Gregory. He was a poet and preacher who probably taught at Paris (c. 1150–85). He studied the liberal arts, and wrote *Summa Quoniam homines, regulae caelestis iuris*, and *The Art of Preaching*, to which he attached 27 model sermons. He urged preachers to adhere closely to the biblical text, and to shun entertainment. He declared: “Preaching should not contain jesting words, or childish remarks, or ... that which results from ... rhythms ... These are better fitted to delight the ear than to edify the soul. Such preaching is theatrical and full of buffoonery, and in every way to be condemned” (cited in Jeffrey, *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition*; tr. in Evans, *Language and Logic of the Bible*). The purpose

of preaching, he declares, “is the forming of men.” It derives from reason and tradition and is public. His account coheres closely with Paul’s in 1 Thess. 2:1–8.

The well-known English author, poet, bureaucrat, and diplomat **Geoffrey Chaucer** (1343–1400) described “the good Parson” in his *Canterbury Tales* as reflecting Alain’s principles, in contrast to the pompous Friar and Pardoner. The Parson “Christes gospel trewely would preach” (*General Prologue* 1.481; Jeffrey (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, 632). He will not provide even the rhetorical satisfaction of alliteration (“Prologue,” *Parson’s Tale* 10.31–44). The Parson preaches repentance and change of life, and speaks only of “wheat,” not of “chaff.” Alain’s work heralded many manuals of preaching. The ability to preach seriously became a requirement for a degree in theology when the universities of Paris and Oxford were founded.

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) praises the Thessalonians because they did not fall away as a result of persecution and suffering. He recalls their perseverance and the sound doctrine which they received. They received the gospel not “in vain,” that is, “not inconsequential but rather rewarding” (*Commentary*, 12). He notes how they match the pattern of suffering and strengthening anticipated in Psalms (e.g., Ps. 92:15) and Proverbs (Prov. 19:11). Paul retained his confidence through persecutions. He demonstrates “the sound character of his preaching . . . He rules out the possibility of error . . . He imputes integrity to his doctrine (2:4)” (13). Thomas compares “Jezebel” to the false prophetesses in Rev. 2:20. He then reflects more broadly on how a poison tongue, full of guile, may do great harm (see Jer. 9:8). By contrast, God has entrusted Paul with his gospel (Gal. 2:7; Acts 9:15). Paul’s single goal of pleasing God alone tests his heart; hence he never used words of flattery (15). Aquinas compares 2 Tim. 6:6 on the advantage of contentment. He adds that to act like a nurse “gives evidence of his humility” (15). Thomas compares 1 Cor. 9:22, “I have become all things to all men,” and 1 Cor. 3:1, “I fed you with milk, not solid food.” Paul is like the good shepherd of Jn. 10:11.

Aquinas discusses 1 Thess. 2:1–15, on “faith is through hearing,” as in *Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 4, art. 8: “Whether faith is more certain than science and other intellectual virtues?” He urges in Paul’s words “You received it not as the word of man, but, as it is indeed, the word of God” (qu. 4, art. 8, reply to obj. 2). Thomas concludes, “Therefore science is not more certain than faith; nor is anything else.” “Faith” is by no means caused by doubt (as today Pannenberg urges), and depends on what a person hears from God, who excels some “expert” in science. Nothing can surpass “the certitude of God’s word, on which faith is founded” (art. 8, reply to obj. 3).

In a different section Thomas declares that doctrine may be “hidden” from the findings of reason (*Summa Theologiae* 3, qu. 42, art. 3, reply to obj. 3). A teacher may wish to withhold knowledge. But neither applies to Christ or to

Paul. False teaching may have the attraction of “stolen waters” (Prov. 9:17). But Christ and Paul taught “not of error or uncleanness” (1 Thess. 2:3). In *Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 132, art. 3, obj. 3, Aquinas quotes Augustine’s gloss on 1 Thess. 2:4, “God who tests our hearts,” to the effect that “Unless a man war against the love of human glory he does perceive its baneful power, for though it is easy for anyone to desire praise as long as one does not get it, it is difficult not to take pleasure in it, when it is given.” Vainglory may not find a place in the servants of Christ. It may not be a “mortal” sin, but Paul declares, in accordance with 1 Thess. 2:1–8, “Let no-one glory in human persons” (see 1 Cor. 1:31; John 5:44). Vainglory is a dangerous sin, and cited as such by Gregory (art. 4). Paul seeks only what is good in the sight of God (qu. 132, art. 1).

**John Wycliffe** (c. 1333–84) declared, “A Christian should speak Scripture’s words on Scripture’s authority in the form that Scripture displays” (*De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* 1.2). He urged “the holiness of the pastor and the wholesomeness of his teaching” (Wycliffe, *Pastoral Office*, 32). The apostle Paul repeatedly impressed on his readers the same thing. Neither bishops nor curates should be greedy for power or money (*Pastoral Office* 1.3–10; Wycliffe, *Pastoral Office*, 33–41). Certain prelates are “infected by the splendour of the world and by avarice” (1.19; 46). Wycliffe continues, “The pastor has a threefold office: first, to feed his sheep spiritually on the Word of God ...; second ... to purge wisely the sheep of disease ...; third ... to defend his sheep from ravening wolves ... sowing the Word of God among his sheep” (2.1; 48). He adds “Among all the duties of the pastor, after justice of life, holy preaching is most to be praised” (2:2; 48; see also Wycliffe, *Sermons* 2.277–85, 447–52). “There is no doubt but that preaching the Word of God is as great as hearing it” (*Pastoral Office* 2.2; 49). “Preaching the gospel exceeds prayer and administration of the sacraments to an infinite degree” (2.2a; 49).

**Walter Hilton** (1340–96) published many influential writings, including his *Ladder of Perfection*. According to Hilton, the test of genuine preaching was absence of guile and deceit, love of truth, and avoidance of gratuitous comments which may disclose its “counterfeit light.” “Self-promotion” and disdain of fellow believers especially can be evidence of diabolical work, or of its purely human origin (*Ladder of Perfection* 2). Plain and honest speech is preferable to duplication and rhetoric.

**John Huss** (1372–1415) echoed Wycliffe’s concern for the primacy of preaching. False preachers, he wrote, “preach on account of and for money, as those deceivers who sell indulgencies for money ... false prophets” (Huss, *On Simony*, 106). The herd of Judas sell themselves to preach, and betray the truth, as if to “buy or sell the gifts of God,” like Simon in Acts 8:18–19. Jesus declared, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Wycliffe and Huss reflected precisely Paul’s concern in 1 Thess. 2:1–8 to avoid guile and greed, and to preach the gospel with integrity from the heart (see Owst, *Preaching in Medieval*

England; Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*). At least five medieval witnesses seem to endorse Paul's concern in 1 Thess. 2:1–8.

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–15) speaks of preaching in his treatise “The Freedom of the Christian” (1520) which constituted a last attempt at reconciliation with Rome, with an accompanying Open Letter to Pope Leo X. Luther declares, “The soul can do without anything except the Word of God ... The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son ... To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it.” He quotes Rom. 10:9. But he qualifies what he has said: “The Word of God cannot be received ... by any works whatever, but only by faith.” For faith unites a person with Christ. Luther rejects such terms as “priest,” “cleric,” “ecclesiastic”; those who preach are called in the New Testament “ministers,” “stewards.” They should “serve others and teach them the faith of Christ.” But a preacher should not be “deceived and deceiving (2 Tim. 3:13) ... blind leaders of the blind ... They blaspheme the grace of God ... They deceive men and lead them to deceive one another like ravening wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15).” “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (*Luther's Works*, 31: *Career of the Reformer*, 1.333–77). For Paul and Luther, preaching the word of God is the mainspring of the gospel. One of Luther's well-known sayings comes from this treatise: “If you believe it, you have it. If you do not believe it, you do not have it” (348–9).

**Heinrich Bullinger** (1504–75) compares Paul's words about his preaching in 1 Cor. 2:1–5 and 1 Thess. 2:1–8. He quotes from Paul: “Our exhortation was not by deceit, nor by uncleanness; nor by guile. But as we were allowed of God that the gospel should be committed to us, even so we speak; not as they that please men, but God, which trieth our hearts. Neither yet did we even use flattering words ... neither sought we praise of men.” Partly like Paul and Luther, Bullinger asserts that it is foolish to think that the church can be gathered “by crafty counsels and the subtle deceit of men” (*Of the Holy Catholic Church*, 313). Bullinger adds that force of arms cannot also “gather” the church nor “princes or soldiers,” but “the doctrine of truth and sound and simple godliness” (313). Paul relies only on the power of God, not rhetoric. If an apostle spills his blood in giving himself to preaching, “Happy is that church” (312).

**Hugh Latimer** (c. 1485–1555) was a parish priest who became bishop of Worcester prior to martyrdom under Mary. He closely follows the ethos of 1 Thess. 2:1–8 on preaching. He was one of the most popular preachers of the English Reformation, noted for his Pauline “boldness” and for his criticism of

“a fat benefice or bishopric.” He declared, “Though a preacher be well learned, yet if he lacks that boldness and is faith-hearted, truly he will do but little good ... When he fears men more than God, he is nothing to be regarded” (*Sermons of Hugh Latimer*, Sermon 27, 507).

Latimer’s most famous sermon is probably “the Sermon of the Plough” (1548), on “All things are written for our learning” (Rom. 15:4). God’s word is a seed sown in “God’s field” (1 Cor. 3:6–8). A preacher is like a ploughman who must first break up the soil; then he plants and waters the seed, to produce “a right faith,” sometimes “weeding them by telling them their faults ... breaking their stony hearts,” and then telling God’s promises to “soft hearts.” But some prelates and clergy fail to do this. As Jeremiah says, “Cursed be the man that does the work of God fraudulently, guilefully, or deceitfully.” How many are there now in England who do that! They are “negligent in discharging their office, or have done it fraudulently; ... they make people ill.” Some become rich through high office in the state; this is “to your shame.” Many are involved in “devilish ploughing,” saying “down with Christ’s cross” and “up with purgatory.” Only Christ “made purgation and satisfaction.” Meanwhile “the prelates take their pleasures,” as lords, not laborers. They need to sow God’s word (*Sermons*; see also *Sermons and Remains of Hugh Latimer*, 70–1).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) notes how Paul reminds the addressees of what they experienced and saw when Paul and his co-workers arrived at Thessalonica. He “declares his integrity” so that they believe that *God*, not man, called them to faith. The preaching was “not a failure” (v. 1), despite persecution and ignominy at Philippi, and humiliation in Thessalonica. Paul did not hesitate to preach in “a large and opulent city” (*Commentary*, 25). The readers had been faithfully instructed in the Word of God. His teaching was free from deception (v. 3). In v. 4 Paul goes further, and appeals to God. God “approves” him, but he does not glory in this, “as though this came from himself” (26). The reference to “not pleasing men” stands in contrast to “pleasing God.” In verses 5–8 Paul states that his rejection of any use of flattery is a fact known to the readers. He was not seeking his own personal gain (27). Calvin sees this as a broader test to reject “those who are hypocritical and spurious” (27). Nursing an infant has nothing to do with “power or dignity” (28). The analogy also points to “wonderful affection”; the nurse spares no trouble to care for the infant.

Calvin considers the church as “the visible Church” (*Institutes* 4.1.2). “Faith comes by hearing” (Rom. 10:17; *Institutes* 4.1.5; tr. Beveridge, 2.284). “It is by the preaching of the gospel, as Paul declares, that he brings it forth” (4.1.5). Christ’s gospel “was not in word but in power” (1 Thess. 1:5; 4.1.6). Calvin typically refers to Paul’s “not glorying in what came from himself.” He cites, “Neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase” (1 Cor. 3:7; *Institutes* 1.4.6). Calvin includes the moral

character of speakers and hearers (4.1.22–23; 4.2.1–12). Falsehoods in the ministry become associated with “the Papacy” (*Institutes* 4.2.2–3).

**Estius** (1542–1613) comments that Paul’s introduction to Thessalonica was fraught with difficulties and dangers (1 Thess. 2:1). Our preaching, Paul urges, was not false or fictional (*non fabulae, non mendacia*), but true. It was not empty (*inanis*), but bore fruit. The Thessalonians did not receive the gospel “in vain,” as Paul argues in 1 Cor. 15: “your labour is not in vain in the Lord.” Their visit to Thessalonica became a model for others, in spite of apostolic dangers and opposition (2:1). Estius refers to the account of the slave-girl in Acts 16 (*Commentarii* 2.556). Paul states, Estius writes, that “exhortation did not arise from error . . . nor guile” (v. 3). Paul and his co-workers were not impostors, but are approved by God as having integrity and purity (557). They did not try to adjust to them or accommodate them (*accommodantes*, v. 5). They did not preach for profit or greed. In vv. 7–8 Estius notes the Greek *nēpioi* (babes) and its parallel *ēpioi* (gentle), referring to Chrysostom and Theophylact. He cites the example of “humility and tenderness displayed by Christ” (559).

**George Herbert** (1593–1633) has two poems which reflect 1 Thess. 2:3–7. He exclaims:

Lie not, but let thy heart be true to God,  
Thy mouth to it, thy actions to them both:  
Cowards tell lies, and those that fear the rod;  
The stormie working soul spits lies and froth.  
Dare to be true. Nothing can need a ly:  
A fault, which needs it most, grows two thereby.

(“The Church-Porch,” *A Priest to the Temple*, 13)

On the priesthood or preaching Herbert observes:

Blest Order, which in power dost so excell,  
That with th’ one hand thou liftest to the sky,  
And with the other throwest down to hell  
In thy just censures; fain would I draw nigh,  
Fain put thee on, exchanging my lay-sword  
For that of th’ holy Word.

(“The Priesthood,” *Poems*, 151)

**Jeremy Taylor** (1613–67), vice-chancellor of Dublin University, chaplain to Charles I, and bishop of Down and Connor, defended Episcopalian order against the Presbyterians; but attacked transubstantiation against the Catholics. He is known today for his devotional works *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying* (1650–1). His section on “Purity of Intention” runs parallel to 1 Thess.

2:3–8. Taylor writes, “In every action reflect upon the end ... Begin every action in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost ... Be careful that we do not the action without the permission or warrant of God; secondly that we design it to the glory of God” (*Selected Writings*, 52). We must rekindle action by praying, “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name let all praise be given.” We must avoid hypocrisy, and recall that God is present in all places (57–8).

**George Fox** (1624–91) founded the Society of Friends in 1652, and in many respects anticipates the pietism of the eighteenth century. In his *Journal* he gives an autobiographical account of his preaching which is sometimes reminiscent of 1 Thess. 2:2–6. He recalls, “As I went, I preached repentance to the people, and there many were convinced ... I stayed some weeks amongst them ... [But] some people ... had a notion that there was no God, but that all things came by nature. I had a great dispute with them, and overturned them, and made some of them confess that there is a living God ... The power of the Lord broke through ... The Lord’s power wrought mightily, and gathered many of them” (*Journal*, 398). Fox transplants Thessalonica into seventeenth-century Nottinghamshire.

## The Eighteenth Century

**William Law** (1686–1761) published *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* in 1728. He declared: “Clergymen must live wholly unto God ... to make our labour acceptable to God ... ‘whether we eat or drink ... do all things to the glory of God’ ... If [our work is] carried on with vain desires, and covetous tempers ... to satisfy ourselves, we can no more be said to live to the glory of God than gluttons and drunkards” (*A Serious Call*, ch. 4, 33–5; see also 32–48). Pride, “vain desires,” and hypocrisy are “odious” (42). “Truth and honesty are the measure of all his dealings with everybody” (43). Ostentation is to be avoided. Law then applies this absolute principle by means of various examples.

**Johannes Albrecht Bengel** (1687–1737) insists that “exhortation” (v. 3) (Greek, *paraklēsis*) “has a wide meaning: when [Paul] rouses the slothful, it is exhortation; when he consoles sorrow, it is comfort”; yet the “whole preaching of the Gospel” is called “exhortation” (*Gnomon*, 798; *New Testament Word Studies* 2.477). Paul disavows evil intentions, including deceit, error, uncleanness, flattery, covetousness, and pleasing the audience (vv. 3, 5). God witnesses to his state of heart. Paul might have appealed to authority, but acted with gentleness like a nursing mother (v. 7). Bengel concludes, “Our soul desired, as it were, to enter into your soul” (478); “*Anima nostra cupiebat quasi immeari in animam vestram*” (*Gnomon*, 798).

**John Wesley** (1703–91), by contrast, extolled Paul’s “boldness,” as Hugh Latimer had done before him, in spite of his conflicts. Wesley wrote, “He calls men to witness an open fact; God, the secret intentions of the heart ... He appeals both to God and man” (*Notes*, 688). Paul and his co-workers were mild and tender, “like a hen surrounded with her young.” They were ready to lay down their lives for the sake of the Thessalonians (v. 8; 688).

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88), John’s brother, composed this hymn on ministry:

O Thou who camest from above  
The pure celestial fire to impart,  
Kindle a flame of sacred love  
On the mean altar of my heart.

Jesus, confirm my heart’s desire  
To work and speak and think for thee;  
Still let me guard the holy fire,  
And still stir up thy gift in me.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 698)

**John Newton** (1725–1807) composed a hymn specifically entitled “Prayer for Ministers,” of which verses 2, 3, and 4 are relevant to our passage. Newton’s fourth verse runs as follows:

Oh! Never let thy sheep complain  
That toys, which fools amuse,  
Ambition, pleasure, praise, or gain,  
Debase the shepherd’s view.

(*Olney Hymns*, 50)

**Edmund Burke** (1729–97), Irish political philosopher and literary figure, served in Parliament as a conservative Whig. He believed profoundly in freedom and toleration. He describes the kind of preacher whom Paul does not wish to imitate. Burke writes of their preaching: “It is piteously doleful, nodding now and then towards dullness; well stored with pious frauds, and like most discourses of the soul, much better calculated for the private advantage of the preacher than the edification of the hearers” (Burke, *Observations on a Publication* “*The Present State of the Nation*,” 1769).

## The Nineteenth Century

**Søren Kierkegaard** (1813–55) is nowadays regarded as one of the most creative thinkers of the nineteenth century. But public opinion was not always so.

Among his numerous philosophical, existential, theological, and autobiographical works is *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (1846). Kierkegaard rejected the distortions which arose from following the crowd. The *individual* is called to make his own decisions before God. God is holy and transcendent, and human individuals are finite and blind. He subtitled the work *Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession*. Kierkegaard wrote, “To will one thing could not mean to will the world’s pleasure and what belongs to it . . . This one thing was one only by deception” (*Purity of Heart*, 121). To will the good and true, we “must be willing to suffer all for it” (122). This is what Paul demonstrates in 1 Thess. 2:1–8. “Cleverness” and self-deception must be avoided (140–9). We must bear all appointed suffering (148–70).

**Hermann Olshausen** (1736–1839) stressed that Paul calls attention to “his purity, his disinterestedness, in the preaching of the Gospel” (*Commentary*, 389). “In power,” as Karl Barth later urged, referred to his *effectiveness*. Paul had “no impure, underhand designs” in his exhortation (Greek, *paraklēsis*). “Impurity” means lack of moral purity of motive, not sexual impropriety. Olshausen believes that such reproaches were in fact leveled at Paul. But how could he depend on God if such were his motives? He sought to be “pleasing God above” (390). Paul attributes all good to God. “Flattery, covetousness, and the itch for glory, are excluded” (391). Olshausen compared Paul’s rejection of flattery in 1 Corinthians, which might imply a comparison with other itinerant sophistic preachers, (see above, Stephen Pogoloff and Andrew Clarke). Paul communicated with “indulgent gentleness” (392), as his analogy of the nurse suggests. The Greek *trophos* properly means a nursing mother (v. 7). Preaching may be a *duty* for Paul; but “giving *his own life* is a voluntary *act of love*” (393; his emphasis).

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93) compares Paul’s personal narrative with Gal. 1:11–2:14. Persecution had not deterred him from proclaiming the gospel boldly. Out of love for the Thessalonians, he had given up his right to be supported financially (which was a different motive from that in 1 Corinthians) (*Thessalonians*, 51). On “you yourselves know,” Jowett comments, “I need not quote others, for you yourselves are my best witnesses” (52). “Exhortation” and “consolation” are both meanings of *paraklēsis*, but they easily pass from one to the other. On Paul’s purity and innocence Jowett compares 4:7 and other passages. The apostle also protests against the charge that he seeks money: “His whole life and conversation were a disproof of it” (55). Although more recently Michel Foucault echoes Nietzsche’s claim that power is an instrument of control and disguise, Paul rejects such a claim regarding him.

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) suggests, “Paul’s residence in Thessalonica was a bright spot on which his [Paul’s] memory delighted to dwell. Every faithful servant . . . has similar recollections” (*Lectures*, 51). Paul was well acquainted “with literal fear, actual timidity, shrinking of the flesh from pain and danger,

[yet] his moral courage appears not obscured, but [places it] in all the stronger, clearer, light” (53). Hutchison continues, “He was emboldened by the thought of the trust committed to him” (54). His courage triumphed over his fear. Sheer nervousness implies thoughts about oneself. But Paul thought only of God. A minister without boldness is like a knife without an edge. Hutchison devotes a further lecture to flattery and avarice. He quotes Shakespeare:

That master lust of the human heart which is never satisfied,  
That satiate yet unsatisfied desire, that tub  
Both filled and running.

(*Cymbeline* 1.6)

Paul practices affectionate “self-abnegation – in willingness to impart ‘also our own souls’ ... our very life,” even as a nursing mother gives of herself for her child (70).

**W. Bornemann** (d. 1858) appeals to what the readers knew full well (*Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, 73). The pattern at Philippi and Thessalonica was broadly similar. Paul’s preaching was not “powerless” (German, *kraftlos*, 74). In v. 3, for “deceit,” Bornemann uses Luther’s word for “fanatics” (*Schwärmerei*, 76). God “knows the true worth of our hearts” (79). Bornemann compares Jer. 11:20 and Rom. 8:27. Verses 5–6 depict the reality of the apostle’s life and preaching. Like Lünemann, he refers to a variety of biblical passages. “Gentle” (Greek, *ēpioi*, vv. 7–8) forms a “major concept” here (84). Paul and his co-workers exceed “caring deeply” (NRSV); they are “*liebvoll*,” literally “full of love,” for the readers.

# 1 Thessalonians

## 2:9–16

## How the Readers Received the Gospel

### Introduction and Overview

Whereas vv. 1–8 largely concerned Paul’s reminiscences of his arrival at Thessalonica and his preaching there, this next section (vv. 9–12) concerns the readers’ witness to his conduct, and especially their *reception* of the gospel: “not as a human word, but as what it really is, God’s word” (v. 13). In their suffering they shared the lot of the earliest believers, and even of Christ Jesus himself. Both suffered at the hands of the Jews and others (vv. 14–16). The following themes emerge:

(1) Verses 9–12 largely recapitulates Paul’s previous section (vv. 1–8), but complements the feminine image of the care of a nurse or nursing mother with the masculine image of the caring father (v. 12). Elizabeth Castelli and Antoinette Wire argue that the “father” image may have overtones of authoritarian manipulation. Castelli, in *Imitating Paul: A Discussion of Power*, argues that Paul uses “father” as an authoritative image to guarantee acquiescence and conformity, especially in 1 Cor. 4:14–21. The plea to “imitate” Paul rests on the principle exposed by the postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault that particular claims to truth too often rest on disguised uses of power (Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 35–58, 122–4). In *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric* Wire claims that Paul imposes a manipulative strategy of disguised rhetoric, which dissociates his thought from reality. Both “reconstructions” run counter to all Paul’s claims in 1 Thess. 2:1–12. Paul explicitly asserts that he renounces guile. Hence we must choose between believing his repeated claims and costly acts, and these hypotheses, which turn the discourse on its head. If they were right, Paul would be either utterly self-deceived or a ruthless, manipulative liar. It would then be difficult to explain passages about the action of God, and mutual love. If Castelli were correct, this would illustrate what Hans Robert Jauss calls discontinuity or “provocation” in reception history. The whole weight of tradition from the fathers until the nineteenth century offers a different reading of Paul from that of Castelli and Wire.

(2) Paul’s willingness to engage in manual labor (2:9; see also 2 Thess. 3:7–13) provides different theories about the nature of his work (Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Testimony and Apostleship*; Hock, “The Workshop as a Social Setting for Paul’s Missionary Preaching”; and Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*). Hock discusses the rival claims of *leather-worker* and *tent-maker*; while Welborn insists that the Greek traditionally rendered *tent-maker* (*skēnopoios*) “should be understood as a ‘maker of stage properties’” (111). Paul valued, rather than despised, manual labor, and was willing to accept its often demeaning status and its hardship. He rejected the Corinthian patrons’ offer to him to be perceived as a paid professional orator. The Thessalonians, Paul urges, are to reflect this same God-pleasing mind-set. They are “to lead a life worthy of God” (v. 12).

(3) The third theme (v. 13) is important. None has achieved more than Karl Barth in differentiating the word of *God* from a purely *human* “word” or message (see Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* and *Church Dogmatics*, esp. vols. 1.1 and 1.2: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*). He writes, “The Word of God is itself the act of God” (*Church Dogmatics* 1.1, 143). “We can even hear Holy Scripture [as] simply ... human words ... But if so, then neither in proclamation nor in Holy Scripture has it been the Word of God that we have heard” (143). “The Word of God is the theme which must be given to proclamation as

such if it is to be real proclamation” (1.1, 91). “God’s own address becomes an event in the human word . . .” (109). The apostles, Barth notes, did not appoint *themselves* the publishers of revelation (115; my emphasis). By way of summary, Barth asserts, “The *Deus dixit* is true – now the *ubi et quando* must come into force again . . . when God by his activating, ratifying, and fulfilling the word of the Bible and preaching lets it become true” (1.1, 120). The Thessalonians perceived that Paul’s word came from God, and was not simply Paul’s human invention. As such, the Word became “active [NRSV, at work] in believers” (v. 13). Barth asserts, “God activated, ratified, and fulfilled” what Paul spoke. The affair transcends “human religious aspiration.” It transferred the hearers of the word into the reality of a new life, or into a new world.

(4) The final section (vv.14–16) shows how the effect of appropriating this word of God transferred believers into a domain in which they shared the pattern of persecution and vindication, of suffering and triumph, of “death” and resurrection with Christ. They share this pattern with the earliest Christians, as well as with Christ himself. Their suffering in Thessalonica is a mark of their solidarity with believers before them and with Christ. Christ bore humiliation at the hands of Jews and others, and this pattern of suffering and vindication now overflows to them. This pattern was embedded in the Old Testament, where it characterizes especially Isaiah and the other prophets and the Psalms. The allusion to “God’s wrath” (v. 16) also anticipates 2 Thessalonians.

(5) We may note finally that Paul is not “anti-Semitic” here. Ben Witherington includes a note to this effect (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 84–7). Paul believes that judgment has fallen on some Jews, namely “those who did the persecution,” but not on Jews in general (85). To confuse this would imply a reversal of Paul’s view in Romans 11, especially vv. 25–6. Some have suggested that vv. 15–16 constitute an interpolation, but most agree that there is no substantial evidence for this. It may be argued that “unbelieving Jews” have no hope of salvation, even in Romans 11. Traugott Holtz and Ben Witherington do not doubt the harmony of Romans 11 and 1 Thess. 2: 14–16 and other Pauline passages (see Holtz, *Der Erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, 103–10). Paul’s emphasis is on the praiseworthy perseverance of the Thessalonians, which puts them on the same footing as Christians in Judea.

We note below that Lanfranc has a positive attitude towards the Jews. By contrast, we note, Thomas Aquinas spoke of the Jewish “mind-set” to kill the Lord Jesus. But Paul is not engaged in a polemic against Jews as such, and Thomas speaks explicitly of unbelieving Jews, as Jeremiah does in Jer. 7: 11. On the face of it, Martin Luther is perhaps the most notorious counterexample of a polemic. In his treatise *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543). Luther writes that the Jews are a “base, whoring people, that is, no people of God” (source and

fuller quotation below). Luther's attitude toward the Jews, however, had changed during his life. In his earlier period, until around 1536, he expressed concern for their situation, in accordance with Paul's concern in Romans 9–11. Luther had argued that the Jews had been prevented from converting to Christianity by the proclamation of what he believed to be an impure gospel of the Catholic Church. In his *Letter to Spalatin* he wrote, "Conversion of the Jews will be the work of God alone operating from within, and not of man working from without." His later polemic, according to some, was in response to an anti-Semitic pamphlet. But this takes us from 1 Thess. 2: 14–16.

## The Patristic Era

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) alludes to 1 Thess. 2:15. He is discussing the value of the shorter epistles, including 1 and 2 Thessalonians. He states that, according to Paul, "The Jews had slain their prophets," implying that Christian believers should not be surprised to suffer the same fate. They even "killed the Lord Jesus" (*Against Marcion* 5.15.1; ANF 3.461).

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) discusses Jewish persecution in his *Letter to Africanus*. He speaks especially of the Jewish leaders, first with reference to Old Testament prophets; to the death of Stephen in Acts 7; and to Paul in 1 Thess. 2:14–15. Paul, he says, declared that the Thessalonians followed in the steps of the Judean Christians, "for you also suffered the things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews" (1 Thess. 2:14). Jesus, Paul, and the readers share the same fate in solidarity with one another (*Letter to Africanus* 9; ANF 4.389). Origen also calls Paul "a marvellous witness" (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* 2). Yet it is written that "one must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Jesus" (*Exhortation to Martyrdom* 12, in *Origen*, 49). This happens if Christ lives in us. It embraces "the whole time of our testing" (*Exhortation* 12). We must share "Christ's cup" (*Exhortation* 28–30). Martyrdom is "the cup of salvation" (Matt. 20:22; see also Matt. 26:39; Mark 14:36).

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) comments that what Paul recalls in v. 9 is narrated in the Acts of the Apostles, especially how Paul and his co-workers labored with their hands to provide a living. By contrast, a "false apostle" (*pseudoapostolos*) takes food without working, and preaches with pretense. Paul gave an example of the Christian life, while the false apostles obscured it (*Ad Thessalonicenses Prima* 217). "Hearing and receiving the gospel as the word of God" (v. 13) refers to God's grace, and speaks of the readers' commitment or allegiance (*devotione*), and their understanding it as teaching from *God*. Their Jewish persecutors (vv. 14–16) are not only hostile to their salvation, but seek to

obstruct their coming to faith, and were “murderous from the beginning” (218). Hence the Thessalonians must follow in the steps of Christ and reflect his patience.

**Basil the Great** (c. 330–379) contains several biblical allusions. He urges Bishop Amphilochius to appoint “a servant of God” who is “a workman that need not be ashamed” (2 Thess. 2:15), “that they may be saved” (1 Thess. 2:16). He must find a man well approved. Appointment is not Paul’s concern in 2:16; but there is an affinity with Paul’s goals. Paul speaks to the Gentiles “so that they may be saved.” Basil informs Amphilochius that this is their goal too, and this is why he must appoint the right person with suitable gifts (*Letter* 90; NPNF2 8.232).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) states that Paul accepts toil, “though the work be laborious and mean” (*Homily* 3; NPNF1 13.332). Paul might have asked for financial maintenance (1 Cor. 9:13–14), but chose not to do this. He worked night and day. Paul is well aware that the readers know all this, because they witnessed it. Of “like a father” (v. 11), Chrysostom observes, “Having spoken of his behaviour, here he speaks of his love” (333). He adds, “We ‘entreat’ you ... that you should gain the kingdom of heaven.” The central verse, v. 13, receives clear attention: “You accepted it not as the word of men ...,” Chrysostom comments, “In hearing us, you gave such heed ... as if God himself were exhorting you.” He then turns to vv. 14–16. It is, he says, “a great consolation” that they are sharing with Christians in Judea. There is continuity in the preaching and in its effects. For “you have suffered the same things” (333). Everywhere Christians both suffer and rejoice. Finally, Paul points to Christ. Some stone and slay the prophets; they insult God ... they banish us. Thus the wrath of God is near, “predetermined and predicted” (*Homily* 3; NPNF1 13.334).

**Augustine** (354–430) alludes to “We worked night and day” in 1 Thess. 2:9. He tells the monks to whom he writes that to undertake manual work at night cannot interfere with preaching (*Of the Work of Monks* 15; NPNF1 3.511). He comments, “A marvellous thing did the Apostle ... amid his so great care of all the churches.” Augustine also speaks of “a livelihood ... by the labours of his own hands” (*The Harmony of the Gospels* 2.73; NPNF1 6.138). He stresses the voluntary nature of Paul’s renouncing that to which he was entitled, as in 1 Cor. 9:7–12. He repeats this allusion to 1 Thess. 2:9 in *Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount* 2.18.57 (NPNF1 6.53; see also *On the Psalms*, Ps. 76:11; NPNF1 8.604). On the central section of v. 13, Augustine quotes in full “You had received from us the word of the hearing of God ...” (*On the Predestination of the Saints*), and urges that Paul would not have given thanks for a *human* activity that *he* did, but for *God* speaking through his word, which led to their faith as a gift of *God*. All is the work of God, which includes preaching and its effects. Augustine and Barth have here a kinship (Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints* 39; NPNF1 5.53). He urges, “There are countless like sayings in the Scriptures respecting the word of God, which is disseminated in many and diverse

languages through the hearts and mouths of men” (*On the Trinity* 15.11.20; NPNF1 3.210). In this chapter (ch. 11) Augustine argues that God’s word is more than the “sensible” or physical word.

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) notes the precision of Paul’s language. For example, he did not say, “We appeared blameless to everyone,” but “*to you believers*” (*Commentary* 111; his italics). He appeals to God’s witness for “what escapes the notice of human beings.” The metaphor of “father” brings out his affection in another way. He consoles the downhearted, but puts fear into those “addicted to sloth.” He contrasts divine and human words (v. 13). They accepted the spiritual gift of inspiration. Adversaries had brought “perils” upon them (vv. 14–16), but thereby they became “imitators” of Christ. Theodoret concludes: “He brings out the manner of the hostility: “preventing us from speaking to the Gentiles.”

## The Medieval Period

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) adds relatively little beyond Ambrosiaster and an expanded paraphrase. Paul reminds his readers, he says, of his “preaching the gospel of God” (*In Epistolam I ad Thessalonicenses*; PL 112.546). Both they and God are witnesses to how Paul preached (vv. 10–12). They accepted his teaching as the teaching of God, and not as human talk (*Dei doctrinam, non sicut hominibus ...*; v. 13, 547). They share a likeness with the early churches of Judea.

**Lanfranc of Canterbury** (c. 1010–89) shows an even greater dependence on Ambrosiaster and often quotes Augustine. But he includes a positive comment on the Jews. The Thessalonians are imitators of other Christians as they face unbelieving Jews; but “then all Israel shall be saved” (“*tunc ... omnis Israel salvabitur*”; *Epistola B. Pauli Apostoli ad Thessalonicenses*, PL 150.334).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) states that labor is “not merely for the sake of the body”; it involves “genuine toil” (*Commentary* 16). He reflects on “the sanctifying influence it [Paul’s lifestyle] may have on a person’s life” (16). He cared for the church, becoming “like a father” to them (see 1 Cor. 4:15). The readers have been “perfectly converted” (17). Aquinas speaks of their courage amid tribulations (2:14). Paul again gives thanks that they follow the truth. Preaching has proved effective, because it was received as the word of *God* (see Ps. 85:8; 18). Thomas compares the dictum: “No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but man moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:21). He also notes: “God is at work in you, both to will and to work his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). In vv. 14–16 Paul speaks of the readers’ trials. They need “patience in the face of difficulties” (18). They suffer like the Christians of

Judea, reminding us of Heb. 10:32: “a hard struggle.” Paul “rebukes the Jews who started the persecution” (19). In v. 16 he gives the reason for their sin: it is part of their mind-set “to kill the Lord Jesus.” This disposition led them to slay the prophets. Jesus predicted that they will “flog you in their synagogues” (Matt. 10:17). Thomas cites Isa. 5:25, “Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he ... smote them”; and Heb. 11:6, “Without faith, it is impossible to please him” (20). They are antagonistic, because they impede the preaching to the Gentiles. It is not Paul alone who so preaches; Peter preached to the Gentiles in Acts 10 and 11. By divine permission, “they fill up the measure of their sins” (20). This points to the foreknowledge and sovereignty of God. Yet “all of Israel shall be saved cf. Rom. 10” (21).

In the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas appeals to 1 Thess. 2:13–15 to urge the certainty of faith. He writes, “The Apostle says (1 Thess. 2:15), ‘When you had received of us the word of hearing,’ i.e. by faith, ‘you received it not as the word of men, but, as it is indeed, the word of God’” (v. 13). He comments, “Nothing is more certain than the word of God; therefore science is not more certain than faith” (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2; qu. 4, art. 8). Doubt is not the origin of faith; further, the authority of the person whom we hear can raise hearing above sight. Finally, faith includes understanding: “science falls short of the certitude of God’s word, on which faith is founded” (2.2; qu. 4, art. 8).

**Dante Alighieri** (1265–1321). The reference to violent persecution in vv. 14–16a, and to divine wrath in v. 16b reminds us of Dante’s *Inferno*. The whole *Comedy* is divided into the three modes of post-mortal existence in Dante’s vision, hell, purgatory, and paradise. His “hell” is complex, consisting of nine “circles” and various compartments, of which that reserved for those who have used violent cruelty may perhaps be relevant to 2:14–16. Dante puts into the mouth of violent persecutors:

To God, to ourselves, and to our neighbor can we  
Use “force ...  
A death by violence, and painful wounds,  
Are to our neighbor given; and in his substance  
Ruin, and arson, and injurious levies; ...  
Violence can be done to the Deity,  
In heart denying and blaspheming Him” ...  
(*The Inferno*, canto 11)

Dante passes through the gate of hell, of which he writes:

All hope abandon, ye who enter in ...  
There sighs, complaints, and ululations loud  
Resounded through the air without a star

Whence I, at the beginning, wept thereat ...  
Accents of anger, words of agony ...  
(*The Inferno*, canto 3)

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1557) writes to Christians to encourage them as they suffer persecution, in a situation akin to that in Thessalonica. Like Paul, he recalls that “you receive it [the gospel] with joyful hearts as a true Word of God, which indeed it is” (see 1 Thess. 2:13; Luther, *Letters*, 195). The greater the reality of God’s grace, he says, the more madly do princes and bishops persecute it. The readers hear “the Saving Word” with gladness. However, “our Jews in this Jerusalem ... not only despise [it], but prevent others from hearing. ‘The wrath of God,’ says Saint Paul, ‘is come upon them to the uttermost’ (1 Thess. 2:15–16). But you are ruled by grace” (195). This strongly reflects the interpretation of Paul’s words and outlook in 1523.

A second letter of Luther’s also concerns “Babylon,” a heretical or persecuting group. The town council of “Babylon” had told the preacher Conrad Cordatus to refrain from preaching, like the Thessalonian politarchs. In 1531 Luther wrote to him, “I pray you for Christ’s sake to leave that Babylon [i.e., Zwickau] in which you are, and give place unto wrath. I see that the people are delivered up to Satan, and that God’s wrath is come upon them to the uttermost” (1 Thess. 2:16; Luther, *Letters*, 299).

On persecution by the Jews, Luther’s language becomes passionate, even as immoderate as some of his antipapist language. In his treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543) Luther writes that the Jews are a “base, whoring people, that is, no people of God, and their boast of lineage, circumcision, and law must be accounted as filth” (*On the Jews and Their Lies*, 154, 167, 229, cited in Michael, *Holy Hatred*, 111). Luther continues, that they are “full of the devil’s feces ... which they wallow in like swine ... The synagogue is an incorrigible whore” (112). He argues that their rabbis should be forbidden to teach. But he does not attribute the specific persecution in 1 Thess. 2: 14–18 explicitly to the Jews, but to “Satan” (*Luther’s Works*, 28.291).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) comments that vv. 9–12 confirm what Paul had said previously. Paul “burned with a wonderful and more than human zeal, inasmuch as, along with the labor of teaching, he labored with his own hands to earn a livelihood” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 28). He would do nothing that would hinder the gospel. “Blameless” signifies that “he had given no occasion for complaint” (29). This meant that any accusation to the contrary would be false. In v. 11 he shows as much concern for the readers as a father would be for his children: “No one will even be a good pastor unless he shows himself to be a father to the church that is committed to him” (29). Teaching alone is not enough (see

Acts 20:26). Both admonition and comfort are needed (30). On “accepting ... as the Word of God” (v. 13), Calvin observes: “Who would not shudder at the thought of resisting God?” (31). The readers received the word with reverence and with obedience. Fear of God is wholesome. Like Aquinas, Calvin speaks here of “the sure ... wrath of God,” which “raises itself above the world” (31). Paul proves this assertion by the effects of the word (see Isa. 55:11, 13; Jer. 23:29). It renews and reforms the life of the Thessalonians. A further effect of this word is to give patient endurance under suffering (vv. 14–16). “They endured grievous troubles” (32). Why do the Jews oppose the gospel? They suffer at the hands of Jews and their own countrymen. From the outset the godly faced “obstinacy and impiety.” Calvin writes of the Jews, “They killed their own prophets and at last the Son of God, and they have persecuted me, his servant” (32). They furiously oppose the gospel, and “come under God’s final wrath” (33).

In the *Institutes* Calvin quotes v. 13 (“not a human word”) under the heading of the marks of the church, and in particular of the nature of the ministry. He discusses the efficacy of the ministry, concerning which some extravagantly extol its dignity, while others disparage it. Paul glories in his apostleship, and “in this sense he elsewhere declares that his Gospel was not in word but in power (1 Thess. 1:5),” and thanks God that through his ministry “you received the Word of God ... not as the word of man, but (as it is in truth) the word of God, which effectually works ... (1 Thess. 2:13)” (*Institutes* 4.1.6; tr. Beveridge, 2.287). Calvin has a second implied reference to 1 Thess. 2:14–16, where he discusses the cross. He writes, “There is a singular consolation, moreover, when we are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. For our thought should then be, how high the honor which God bestows upon us in distinguishing us by the special badge of his soldiers” (*Institutes* 3.8.7; tr. Beveridge, 2.20). Persecution and suffering point back to the cross, and to the distinctive life of those “in Christ.”

**Estius** (1542–1613) comments that by *work* (v. 9) Paul means *manual* work, which indicates his love for the Thessalonians (*D. Pauli Epistolas* 2.559). He appeals to the twofold witness of God and the church (v. 10; 560), and reminds the readers of his fatherly care and love (v. 11). Estius stresses that the word of God is the gospel, handed on as “the teaching of God himself” (v. 13): “that is, the word of God which you heard from us, which we preached to you” (460). The Thessalonians accepted it as such; this is the Christian faith. Estius, the Catholic exegete, is as insistent about this as Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Barth. He also appeals to Augustine, and to the effects of this divine word (561). His comments on vv. 14–16 follow those of most commentaries, citing Ambrosiaster. However, Estius expounds the events of the crucifixion and its meaning, citing Pilate’s role in John 19, and comparing the persecution of Peter in Acts 3 and the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7. He comments concerning the Jews’ reception of Christ: “He came to his own,

and his own received him not” (John 1; 563). He also alludes to the salvation of the remnant of Jews in Romans 11.

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) refers to 1 Thess. 2:13 in the context of discussing the authority of scripture. He cites the standard counterargument that the church is older than the writing of the New Testament. But through God himself the authority of the word of God is “necessary and sufficient ... it binds the consciences of all those to whom the discourse is addressed or directed, to accept it in a becoming manner ... It is as if delivered by God ... The Church acknowledges it as Divine (Gal. 1:8, 9; ... John 1:6, 7; 1 Thess. 2:13).” To contradict this is “foolish and blasphemous [and] ... employed by Popish writers” (Arminius, *Works*, 1, Disputation 1, “On the Authority and Certainty of the Scriptures,” 3–5, 212). Arminius also refers to 2:12, where God works through Christ, rendering God “the efficient cause of ... vocation” (*Works*, 1, Disputation 16, 3.304).

**William Shakespeare** (1564–1616) refers to the relation between father and son in *The Merchant of Venice*. In principle the relation is intimate, but the blind old man Gobbo does not recognize his son, Lancelot, who responds, “It is a wise father that knows his own son” (2.2.83). Normally the relation is close and caring, but it can be disrupted. In *Henry V* he also contrasts empty and ineffective human words with militant action: “For Nym, he hath heard that men of few words are the best men ... his few bad words are matched with as few good deeds” (*Henry V*, 3.2.39–42).

**George Herbert** (1593–1633) comes close to the theme of 1 Thess. 2:14–16, which compares the readers’ suffering with that of Paul and of Christ. In “Affliction II” he writes:

Kill me not ev’ry day,  
Thou Lord of Life; since thy one death for me  
Is more than all my deaths can be,  
Though I in broken pay  
Die over each hour of Methusalems stay.

If all men’s tears were let  
Into one common sewer, sea, and brine;  
What were they all, compar’d to thine?  
Wherein if they were set,  
They would discolor thy most bloody sweat.

Thou art my grief alone,  
Thou Lord conceal it not: and as thou art  
All my delight, so all my smart;  
Thy crosse took up in one,  
By way of imprest, all my future mone.

(*Works*, 57)

**Jeremy Taylor** (1613–67), chaplain to King Charles I, and bishop of Down and Connor, reflects on Paul’s willingness to undertake menial labor. He writes: “Think not of thyself better for anything, that happens to thee from without ... Believe thyself an unworthy person ... Be content that others should think it to be true ... Be careful to want praise, never being troubled when thou art slighted or undervalued ... Never be ashamed of thy trade, or thy present employment ... Use no strategies and devices to get praise” (“Humility,” in *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living*, ch. 2, sect. 4, 1–6, 14; see 1 Thess. 2:9–13).

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) writes (c. 1685) of Paul’s “care and solicitude of mind,” his voluntary labor for bread, and blameless life in 2:9–10. He is like a father (v. 11) because he cared for the Thessalonians, and because “he begat them,” as in 1 Cor. 4:15 (*Commentary*, 737). The readers, he says, received the Word “not as the word of men,” or because of “the eloquence or learning of the preacher ...; or as papists: ‘We believe it because the Church believeth it’” (738). It is from *God*, “a Divine faith,” to be heard “with reverent attention.” On vv. 14–16 he speaks of “suffering from the unbelieving Jews of their own country” (738). “The spirit of persecution was natural to them,” Poole asserts, as may be seen from their persecution of the prophets and of Jesus. “They highly displeased God,” in spite of all their advantages. They “fill up ... such a measure and degree [of sin], as will at last bring destruction” (738). Poole has exercised typical post-Reformation polemic against both “papists” and Jews.

## The Eighteenth Century

**Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) writes in his *Concise Commentary* on v. 13: “We should receive the word of God with affections suitable to its holiness, wisdom, truth, and goodness. The words of men are frail and perishing ... and sometimes false, foolish, and fickle; but God’s word is holy ... and faithful. Let us receive and regard it accordingly.” This word of God enabled the readers to be patient under suffering and in trials. Murder and persecution are hateful to God. Those who forbid preaching the word do not please God. They have “cruel hearts, and are enemies to the glory of God, who deny them the Bible.”

**Jonathan Edwards** (1703–58) witnessed and participated in the “Great Awakening” of America, but assessed its effects critically. He therefore comments in a model way on the difference between hearing the word as a purely human word, with a temporary superficial conversion, and hearing the true word of God, with lasting effects. Edwards reserved the word “spiritual” for those who truly heard the word of God, and experienced the effects of the work of the Holy Spirit (*Treatise on Religious Affections*, sect. 1). He declared, “The Spirit of God is

given ... as a divine supernatural spring of life and action” (*Treatise* 1.1). He continues, “Their conviction is an *effectual* conviction” (1.2; his emphasis). On the other hand, not all who seem to respond, have such a conviction (*Treatise*, sect. 5): “It is astonishing how greatly many are deceived about themselves as to this matter” (sect. 6). Gracious affections differ from those that are false and divisive (sect. 8). If the word of God has been truly received, “all true saints are of a loving, benevolent, and beneficent temper” (sect. 8).

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88) wrote hymns not only on the cross, but also on persecution and conflict:

Soldiers of Christ arise,  
And put your armour on,  
Strong in the strength which God supplies  
Through his eternal Son ...

Stand then in his great might,  
With all his strength endued,  
But take, to arm you for the fight,  
The panoply of God.

**John Newton** (1725–1807) was the great hymn-writer of the late eighteenth century. He addresses the Thessalonians’ combination of persecution and vindication as they reflect on Christ’s example:

When the wounded spirit hears  
The voice of Jesus’ blood,  
How the message stops his fears  
Which else in vain had flowed ...  
Lord, to thee for help I call,  
’Tis thy promise bids me come;  
Tell him thou hast paid for all,  
And that thou shall strike him dumb.  
(*Works*, 622)

## The Nineteenth Century

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93) points out that initially Paul did proclaim the gospel in the Jewish synagogue for three sabbaths, if we follow the Acts account. We also make a mistake if we picture Paul exclusively preaching, rather than engaging fully in manual labor. Normally, he says, “He was a man of station and education” (*Thessalonians*, 57). So the long hours of manual labor would have cost him much. Did he wish to identify with poorer members of his flock? Or

was it all a matter of example? Or was it “to distinguish himself from the strolling soothsayers who wandered over Greece and Asia, ‘telling some new thing?’” (57). Whatever his motive, Paul did not burden the church. He wished to be “irreproachable” (v. 10; 58).

Jowett’s well-known essay on “The Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (1860), suggests that he would make less than many of v. 13, “not as mere human words.” The emphasis falls on “I preached to you with success” (59). The power of the received word enables the readers to resist persecution (v. 14). “The Apostle ‘goes off’ upon the word *Jews*, it would seem at first sight, inappropriately” (60). But Paul is aware that they hinder his path to preaching to the Gentiles. His theology of the atonement makes him pass over the point about solidarity with Christ fairly rapidly (vv. 15–16). Yet Jowett shows sensitivity about the subject of “the Jews.”

**Charles Ellicott** (1816–1905), in 1866, also focused on the cost of Paul’s manual labor: “The Apostle and his followers practically gave up their ‘existence’ to their converts” (*Thessalonians*, 23). The “witness” by God and the readers is closely related to the word “martyr” (v. 12; 26). Ellicott interprets the participle to mean “when you received the word” (v. 13; 28) defining the grounds for “we give thanks.” Most of his comments concern grammar and syntax. The Greek “of God” (*tou Theou*) is interpreted as the word “from God” (28). But he adds a theological comment: “The importance of this clause as asserting the direct inspiration of the spoken words must not be overlooked” (28–9). “In Christ Jesus” (v. 14) is also theologically expanded as “in union and communion with Him; incorporated with Him who is the Head.” Ellicott is probably right in the light of a fuller Pauline corpus, but whether this comes from Thessalonians alone remains perhaps an open question.

**Gottlieb Lünemann** (1819–94) covers the whole passage in the series edited by H. A. W. Meyer (*Thessalonians* [1st edn. 1850, 3rd edn. 1867], pp. 55–75). Paul’s recollection of his visit is made in such a way to call attention to his warmth and love. Verses 11–12 are “not a mere further digression” (58), but enlarge on the theme of witness (61–2). In v. 13 the word of God “is decisive ... The word ... proceeds from God, whose author is God himself” (64). Verse 14 concerns not sincerity (as Oecumenius and Calvin suggest), but the nature of the word as a “life-power” or “moving principle” in the readers’ lives (65). The Jews are “hardened enemies of God” (v. 15; 66). The readers’ endurance is thus all the more impressive. The “outbreak” of God’s wrath has not yet appeared, but is impending (73). In a special note, Lünemann rejects the suggestion that this thought is un-Pauline. Such a suggestion is “far-fetched” (74).

**W. Bornemann** (d. 1858) also notes Paul’s thanksgiving for the readers’ suffering and joy, and the earnestness and zeal of his preaching (*Die Thessalonicherbriefe* [1894], 97). Everything is for the sake of God and God’s

will and purpose, and the readers received God's word with faith (98). As Paul asserts in 1 Cor. 15:13, he preaches what has been revealed and transmitted to him (see Gal. 1:9; Phil. 4:9; 100). This is no merely human word, but what God reveals about God's acts in history and the world (Phil. 2:11, 13). The gospel concerns reality (101). Bornemann also notes that the readers, Paul, and Jesus all shared the same tribulation, for these are the people who belong to Jesus (107). But God's people will be protected and guarded (110). Paul also will give hope for the remnant of Israel, in Romans 9–11 (114–17).

# 1 Thessalonians

2:17–3:13

## **Paul’s Longing to See the Thessalonians and Timothy’s Visit and News**

### **Introduction and Overview**

As a good and caring pastor, Paul did not want to leave so quickly, and finds himself “bereft” of his converts (v. 17). He longed to see them again, as soon as circumstances allowed. “Face to face” meeting (v. 17b) is worth many letters, although letters may serve as a second best. Even when Paul had decided to risk coming to them, “Satan hindered” him (v.18). Paul finds his

converts a source of joy, or “our crown of exultation . . . our glory” (v. 19). Paul will later tell the Corinthians that he is “absent in body but present in spirit” (1 Cor. 5:3). The circumstances are doubly troublesome, for Paul’s absence leaves the young Gentile converts as “orphans.” Paul is aware that although God remains in control, a hostile force also operates. This provides one of many links with apocalyptic.

Paul found his enforced absence unbearable. Hence he sent Timothy, his co-worker, to Thessalonica to encourage the church (v. 2), and to bring him news of them (v. 5; see also 3:1–5). The word “willingly” (v. 1) suggests that Paul’s parting with Timothy involved “some kind of sacrifice in sending Timothy away” (Best, *Thessalonians*, 130). Paul does not want the readers to be disturbed by the tribulations which they experience, as if to imply that something had gone wrong: “You know that we are destined for this” (v. 3). Paul later expounds this as sharing the sufferings of Christ, as well as his resurrection. Since he speaks of being alone, Paul may have sent Silvanus on another mission. Acts does not mention Timothy’s visit, but it is not a comprehensive account. Paul’s aim to encourage and strengthen the readers typifies his pastoral care. Some preachers may prefer rebuke rather than encouragement. Paul did not want his converts to be “disturbed” (v. 3).

At last Timothy brought Paul good news (3:6–10). Paul’s heart is flooded with relief. He declares, “What thanksgiving then, are we able to return to God for you . . .?” (v. 9). To “bring good news” (Greek verb, *euaggelizesthai*, v. 6) is used on every other occasion in the New Testament of “preaching the gospel,” but here it has its everyday sense. Paul is delighted with the report of the church’s faith and love (v. 6), which are mentioned not as “virtues,” but as trust in God, which works itself out in love. Affliction and tribulation (v. 7) have not made them bitter, but still trustful. “If you stand firm” (v. 8) does not express doubt, but expresses a hoped-for condition. “How can we thank God enough?” expresses the heart of Paul’s reaction to the good news. It leads him to renewed prayer to see them face to face (v. 10). Prayer is seldom absent from Paul.

As a piece of epideictic rhetoric, Witherington suggests that Paul is trying to invite emotions of reverence and pathos (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 101). But it is doubtful whether the thanksgiving and blessing in 3:11–13 constitutes more than a spontaneous speech-act of blessing God. Paul has already expressed his thanks to God in words; now he turns this into a speech-act, which is more than mere words. It is more than a simple “wish-prayer” (Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 101–5; Wiles, *Paul’s Intercessory Prayers*, 52–63). John L. Austin classified “we thank” as a “behabitive” performative or “illocutionary” indicator, which expresses a reaction to someone else’s behavior, like “I apologise,” or “I bless.” Austin declares, “The utterance is the performing of an action” (*How to Do Things with Words*, 6, 159; for more sophisticated accounts, see Searle,

*Expression and Meaning*, 1–57; Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement*, 34–6, 57–8, 80–143; Briggs, *Words in Action*, 178–82; and Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics*, 51–150).

Two consequences follow. First, it should not puzzle us that a first and second benediction occurs in 1 Thess. 3:11–13 and in 5:23–8. This suggests no theory of partition. The first benediction arises out of 3:6–11, and therefore no good reason arises for separating them into two sections. The proximity of 3:6–10 and 3:11–13 assists an appreciation of their different function. The earlier section largely conveys information and expresses feelings; the latter section constitutes an *act* of thanksgiving and of blessing. The language includes what Briggs and Searle call “indirect” performatives. But they still constitute actions-through-words. In Austin’s language, they *do* something as well as say something. “Our” in v. 11 becomes “you” in vv. 12–13, as the blessing becomes more explicit.

## The Patristic Era

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) embodies a string of references to 1 Thessalonians. He cites 2 Thess. 2:19, “For what is our hope, our joy or crown of boasting ...? Is it not you?” (*On the Resurrection* 24; ANF 3.562). Tertullian collects passages from the Pauline epistles which presuppose the resurrection. He similarly quotes 1 Thess. 3:13, “at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints,” as well as 1 Thess. 4:13–14, “God will bring with him [Christ] those who have died.” In the same chapter he appeals also to 2 Thess. 2:1–10, and 1 Thess. 5:1–3. Although he does not attempt a contextual exegesis of 1 Thess. 2:19, Tertullian shows that he is closely familiar with Paul’s train of thought, especially on eschatology. In chapters 48–52, he considers 1 Corinthians 15, without suggesting any tension with 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) discusses resurrection, but not 1 Thess. 2:17–3:13 in extant texts. His approach is different from Tertullian’s, but he believes in a judgment of reward or punishment after death, and the raising of the body in incorruption (*On First Principles*, preface 5; ANF 4.240). It will be raised as a spiritual body “in a way that is worthy of God” (*Against Celsus* 5.18–23; ANF 4.550–3). Some church fathers believed that, unlike Tertullian, Origen denied the real corporeality of the body (Jerome, *Letter to Pammachius against John of Jerusalem* 23–36; NPNF2 6.435–43). Origen, however, writes at length on “glory” (v. 20; *On First Principles* 4.1.7–8; ANF 4.34–57), and asserts that human beings can experience this glory, perhaps in *bodily* form. God’s glory can be shared with humans. This is in accord with 1 Thess. 2:20, “You are our glory and joy.” Origen believed in the figure of Satan (v. 18). God remains

sovereign and supreme, but some of the angels “cooled” in ardor, as they contemplated God by free will. The first to cool was Satan: “He was once light, before he went astray and fell ...” (*On First Principles* 1.5.5; ANF 5.259–60). Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall from heaven” (Luke 10:18). Satan is thus an apostate and a fugitive, although he was once without sin. Now he becomes “an opposing power” (1.5.5; 260). Hence Paul may speak of him as blocking the advance of the gospel.

**Athanasius** (c. 296–373) refers to Paul’s exultant language in 1 Thess. 2:19. Trials and dangers face Tracontius, but Athanasius urges him to do what God requires. Think of Paul, he declares. In spite of his unworthiness, Paul boldly preached the gospel: Athanasius writes, “He had his converts as his joy and his crown” (1 Thess. 2:19; Athanasius, *Letter* 49.4; NPNF2 4.559). Paul becomes a model for preaching. He said, “Woe is me if I preach not the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16). Tracontius is “dear” to Athanasius, but he should not listen to his over-cautious adviser. He should initiate Paul’s boldness, even in the midst of trials. This is an appropriate application of v. 19.

**Ambrosiaster** (d. c. 380) conveys Paul’s sense of yearning eagerly to see the readers face to face. Without him they become virtually orphans (*defraudati* and *desolati*), although not absent in heart (*Ad Thessalonicenses* 1.219). Some things cannot be conveyed by letter, and ought not readily to be made public. Satan became a hindrance, perhaps through the agency of the Jews (220). Paul asserts, “For are you not our hope or joy, or crown of glory?” (v. 19). Therefore Paul sent Timothy to witness to the same teaching, and to show the merits of Christian growth, even if the readers suffered affliction and persecution (3:1–4; 221). When Paul could bear it no longer (3:5), he sent Timothy as bishop or overseer (*episcopum*), to know the facts. When Timothy came, he reported on their faith and love (*caritatem*, 3:6). He told us that they remembered us kindly. Thus Paul is consoled or encouraged, even in distress (vv. 7–9). He rejoices with an overflowing heart (v. 10; 222). Paul now prays to God the Father, because all things are from him. But he also prays to the Lord Jesus Christ, who derives from him, through whom are all things. He prays that God may direct the readers (v. 11; 223), and may make them grow or be enlarged, in multiplying all good things which he heard from Timothy (v. 12). May God strengthen them, he prays, “with holiness in love at the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, before his testing at the judgment, when he will appear in majesty with his saints” (v. 13).

**Gregory of Nazianzus** (c. 329–389/90) cites 2 Thess. 2:19 in his “Farewell” *Oration* (381). What, he asks, is his defense of his life? He begs to borrow Paul’s language. He asserts, “You are my defence; my witnesses, and my crown of rejoicing” (1 Thess. 2:19; *Oration* 42.2; NPNF2 7.386). Gregory thus reapplies Paul to himself.

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) cites 1 Thess. 2:19, “What is my hope or joy? Is it not you?” (*Homilies on Matthew* 58.7; NPNF1 10.362). He also cites 3:8, “We live, if you stand fast” (*Homily* 58.7 on Matthew; NPNF1 10.362–3). Chrysostom writes on Matt. 17:22–3, “The Son of Man shall be betrayed ...” Jesus teaches a lesson from a little child. Arrogance is distasteful and wrong. Paul endures any humiliation for the sake of his converts, who are his joy and glory. He also writes here that Paul’s expression of longing to see the readers springs not from flattery, but from love and affection (*Homily on 1 Thessalonians* 3; NPNF1 13.334). They are like children deprived of their father and their nursing mother” (2:17). But Paul also feels bereft on his side. The longing is mutual: “See how great is his love ... This is truly fervent love.” Since he can do nothing himself, he sends Timothy to represent him. We wanted to come, Paul assures them, but Satan hindered us (v. 18). Something unexpected and violent occurred, perhaps a plot by the Jews. For are not you “our hope, our joy or crown of glorying?” (v. 19). Paul thinks of this entire church as his glory and joy (v. 20).

Paul was aware that his readers would face sufferings (vv. 3–4). It is a comfort that Paul predicted them; they do not arise by chance. We are “appointed” to them (335). Present hearers or readers of Chrysostom’s time must view affliction in this way. Christ has suffered. But even though wounded, “[We] will then be able to shine in the presence of the king” (335). Christians are indeed “soldiers,” and Jesus said, “In the world you shall have tribulation” (John 16:33). Paul said, “Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12–14; 336). Peter speaks of Satan as “a roaring lion” (1 Pet. 5:8). We are “appointed” to both sufferings and crowns. Chrysostom writes, “Make the trial, and you will see the glory of God” (338). Further, if possessions are at stake, “Let us despise wealth.”

Chrysostom explores 1 Thess. 3:5–18. He notes Paul’s longing to know how the Thessalonians are faring. Might his labor, after all, be in vain? He sends Timothy to find out, and on his return with “glad tidings,” Paul rejoices (*Homily* 4; NPNF2 13.340). He rejoices in the way in which they remember him, and in their longing to see him. Chrysostom comments, “He did not require them to be thankful to him ... but he was thankful to them” (*Homily* 4; 340). Verse 9, as we have suggested, constitutes a peak: “What thanksgiving can we render again to God for you ...?” (341). They are causes of life and joy (vv. 9–10). Hence night and day Paul prays, as “a sign of joy” (341). This does not presuppose that nothing was lacking in them, but Paul thanks God for what God has made them. The prayer in vv. 11–12 that God may direct Paul to them “is a proof of excessive love” (341). Paul prays also that God may establish their hearts (v. 13). The heart is the hidden source of so much, from unbelief to purity: “It is love that makes them inflammable” (342). Chrysostom concludes, “If the fire of the Sun of Righteousness has touched our souls, it will leave nothing frozen, nothing hard ... nothing unfruitful. It will bring out ... all things sweet, all things abounding with much pleasure” (*Homily*

4; NPNF1 13.343). Chrysostom finally refers to 1 Thess. 2:19 in his *Homily on Phil.* 1:22–6 (*Homily* 4; NPNF1 13.199). There we find a reciprocal glorying in what Christ has done through Paul and what God has done in the Philippians.

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) comments on “like orphans” (*Commentarii*, 16). He shows much affection towards them, for he says that his absence leaves them as seeming to have no fatherly care. But this is not his personal choice: Satan hindered him. Nevertheless they always eagerly desire him and his co-workers, as Paul and his colleagues long for them (*simper desiderantes nos sicut nos vos*; 19). We then heard from Timothy, Paul asserts, of those good things which gave us great joy. Therefore Paul persists in prayer, not least that God may direct his way to the Thessalonians (3:11). Paul makes much of their mutuality of affection (*Commentarii*, 20).

**Pelagius** (c. 360–430) refers to “absent in body, but present in Christ,” making 1 Cor. 5:3 reflect 1 Thess. 2:17. It was not that Paul lacked eagerness to come (v. 19; *Expositions*, 425). He repeats the points made by others about sending Timothy, but he departs from Chrysostom and Theodore in adding a reference to the words of Jesus: “Behold, I am sending you as sheep in the midst of wolves” (426). He amplifies Paul’s reference to “the tempter” (3:5) with reference to the trials of testing of Job. Paul is concerned lest his labor should prove in vain (*inanis*). But Timothy has now reported that the readers’ faith is firm and love continues, and Paul is comforted (427). Therefore, Pelagius comments, Paul and his co-workers pray night and day that whatever is lacking in the readers’ faith may be completed. Paul prays that their love may “abound and increase” (v. 12; 428), and that God will strengthen their hearts (v. 13). He quotes Isaiah at the end of the chapter: “and you will be to me a righteous people, says the Lord.”

**Augustine** (354–430) has a variety of direct quotations from, and allusions to, this passage. He attacks Faustus for claiming to be a Christian, while rejecting certain biblical passages. We warn, he says, against “pseudo-Christians,” while defending “semi-Christians” (to borrow Faustus’ term) as merely “imperfect” Christians. Paul, after all, speaks of “making up the deficiency in your faith in Christ” (1 Thess. 3:10; Col. 2:5; *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean* 1.3; NPNF1 4.156). Augustine urges that a rebuke from an elder or from one in authority should not be neglected. Teachers and apostles expected to be heard. Yet Paul urges that love is still more important. Thus in 1 Thess. 3:12, he prays, “The Lord multiply you, and make you to abound in love one towards another and towards all” (*On Rebuke and Grace* 3.5; NPNF1 5.473). The love which fulfills the commandments comes not from ourselves, Augustine argues, but from God. We love, because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). God first sets his love upon us, and chooses us. Hence Paul can say of the Thessalonians, “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love ...” (1 Thess. 2:12; *On Grace and Free Will* 18.38; NPNF1 5.460).

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) refers to this passage both in his *Commentary* and in his *Letters*. In 1 Thess. 2:17 Paul uses the analogy of “a youngster lamenting his being separated from his parents at an early age,” just as Paul compared himself also to a nursing mother and kindly father (*Commentary*, 2.112). “In person, not in heart” is an appropriate phrase, since Paul is deprived of their sight, but not of the thought of them. “Successive trials” faced Paul, but his converts constituted his hope and joy in the presence of Christ. Theodoret notes that mothers often give such names as “Hope” and “Joy,” which shows the suitability of Paul’s language. Paul sent Timothy to the readers “not to propose to you a different teaching from ours, but to confirm you in the former teaching” (113). Christ himself predicted persecution. He borrows from Pelagius the saying about “sheep amidst wolves,” and adds, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness” (Matt. 5:10).

Timothy’s report brings Paul satisfaction. He cites their faith, their love, and their positive memory of him. Theodoret observes, “Faith implies steadfastness in godliness; love, the practice of virtue; and memory of their teacher ... their regard for his teaching” (113). Paul’s happiness “overwhelms the tongue’s hymnody: we are unable to offer to God a hymn that does justice to the satisfaction arising in us” (114). Hence he turns to prayer. The wording, Theodoret claims, “brings out also the equality of Father and Son” (114). Further, he prays that they may abound in love, as they go on to meet the Lord. Theodoret also refers to 1 and 2 Thessalonians a number of times in his *Letters*. In his *Letter to John the Oeconomus*, he discusses Christology, the Spirit, and baptism. Jesus Christ, he asserts, is the only begotten Son of God. Paul strongly emphasizes the future advent. In 1 Thess. 1:9–10, the readers turned from idols “to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He [God] raised from the dead.” Then he cites 1 Thess. 3:12–13, “The Lord make you increase and abound in love ... unblameable in holiness before God ... at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints” (*Letter 146 to John the Oeconomus*; NPNF2 3.321). This is a good example of where exegesis and doctrine support each other.

## The Medieval Period

**Bede the Venerable** (c. 673–735) draws from Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine* 3.4.8 a technical discussion of the grammar of “brothers” (or “brothers and sisters”) in 1 Thess. 3:7. It might be vocative (as the NRSV interprets it), or “the objective case” (accusative), to mean, “we have encouraged brothers [and sisters] about you through your faith.” Bede observes, “We desire it to be in the vocative,” as being more exact (*Excerpts from the Works of St. Augustine*, 285–6).

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) not only repeats many of the same Latin words as Ambrosiaster, but conveys many of the same points (*Opera Omnia*, in PL 112/6.548). On vv. 19–20 he quotes Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) as saying that “great glory belongs to the office of the priests” (*sacerdotis*, 548). If priests neglect this office, they come under judgment. Rabanus Maurus then recounts the sending of Timothy, and the mutual eagerness of Paul and his converts to see each other (549).

**Anselm of Canterbury** (c. 1033–1109) writes primarily as a theologian rather than as a commentator. He shows with 1 Thess. 3:12–13 the sense of love, abundance, and completeness, that Paul conveys. Anselm writes, “Does beauty delight thee? The just shall shine as the sun” (Matt. 13:43). Does swiftness ... delight thee? They shall be like the angels of God” (Matt. 22:30) ... God shall love them more than they love themselves, for they love him and themselves and each other through him ... They shall be all-powerful to accomplish what they will ... They shall will only what God wills ... What joy there must be, what great joy, where there is such a good ... Needy heart, heart acquainted with hardships – how greatly wouldst thou rejoice if thou didst abound in all these things” (*Proslogion* 25; in Fairweather (ed.), *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 90–1).

**Bernard of Clairvaux** (1090–1153) wrote his well-known work *On the Love of God*, which spoke of “four degrees” of love, to which we have referred elsewhere in this commentary. But when he prays that the Thessalonians may “abound,” Paul probably does mean this only quantitatively. Bernard’s “degrees of love” clarifies the notion of “abounding” in faith and love. In the first degree, Bernard writes, man begins to seek God “through faith as something ... necessary for him ... He loves God, according to the second degree.” “By being obedient ... He [God] grows sweet, and thus by tasting how sweet is the Lord, he passes to the third degree, so that he loves God now ... for Himself ... I know not if the fourth degree is obtained in its perfection by any man in this life” (“The Four Degrees of Love,” *On the Love of God*, 15).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) comments that in this passage Paul wants “conversation ... *in person*” (*Commentary*, 21; emphasis original). Some things require the presence of a friend. His eagerness looks forward to Rom. 15:23, where he has “longed for many years” to come to Rome. Thomas notes that Paul speaks for his other two co-workers. Satan hindered them “perhaps through violent winds,” as in Rev. 7:1, “the four winds of the earth.” The readers are their “joy or crown of boasting” (v. 20). Paul desires to see them, to give thanks. Aquinas writes, “The greatest reward of the preacher comes from those whom he has converted” (21). The last phrase invites comparison with 1 Cor. 9:15: “I would rather die than have any one deprive me of my ground for boasting.” Thomas compares Paul’s experience of being able to bear it no longer

(3:1) with Gen. 45:1, “Joseph could not control himself.” Paul had reached the limit of his patience, so he chose to send Timothy, of whom he says, “I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare” (Phil. 2:20; *Commentary*, 23). He compares Prov. 18:19, “A brother helped by a brother is like a strong city.” The word “servant” also comes in 2 Cor. 11:23. Hence Timothy’s task is to strengthen the Thessalonians. An analogy is found in Job 4:4, “Your words have upheld him who was stumbling,” and “Strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:32). For it is their destiny to face trials: “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Paul fears that the tempter may be at work. He asks, “Is to tempt in the power of the devil”? He replies, “It is written (1 Thess. 3:5) ‘lest perhaps he who tempts should have tempted you’” (*Summa Theologiae* 1, qu. 114, art. 2). He further declares, “to which the gloss adds, ‘That is, the devil, whose office is to tempt. To tempt is properly speaking to make trial of something . . . A demon cannot change the will.’ This ‘cannot be forced; it can be inclined’ (1, qu. 114, art. 2). In his *Commentary* he compares James 1:14, “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” He quotes Gen. 22:1: “God tested Abraham.” “‘To tempt’ means to make a test of something” (24). Thomas adds, “It is the devil’s business to tempt in order to deceive” (25). A good memory is a blessing (Sirach 49:1; Prov. 10:7). Hence Paul asks, “What thanksgiving can we render to God for you . . .?” Thomas refers to psalms of consolation (Ps. 94:19), and to consolation in 2 Cor. 1:3. “Blessed be the God . . . of all comfort” (26). Paul implies that he is worthy to give thanks: “With what shall I come before the Lord?” (Mic. 6:6), or “What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me?” (Ps. 116:12). Yet he points out the frequency of his prayer (v. 11): “Night and day” suggests “in adversity and prosperity” (26). Paul also wants to add what is lacking in their faith and because of “some special teachings which the Apostle did not preach to them at their [spiritual] birth” (26). This would be in line with 1 Cor. 3:1, “I could not address you . . .” Thomas shows an encyclopedic knowledge of scripture.

**Julian of Norwich** (1343–1413) wrote: “Our habits of prayer were brought to my mind, and how in our ignorance of love, we are accustomed to use intermediaries . . . It was then that I saw that it brings more honour to God and more delight, if we pray to him for his goodness than if we employ all the intermediaries in the world. Why? Because his goodness is full and complete, and in it there is nothing lacking (*Revelations of Divine Love*).

**Margery Kempe** (c. 1373–c. 1438) does not engage directly with 1 Thessalonians, but offers imaginative dialogue with God which bears on the theme of tribulation and consolation. She imagines: “Daughter, I sent once St. Paul unto thee, to strengthen and comfort thee, so that shouldst boldly speak in My Name . . . Thou hast suffered much tribulation because of his writings, and he promised thee thou shouldst have as much grace there-against, for his love. He told thee of many joys

in heaven, and of the great love that I had for thee ... He is ready to comfort thee and speak with thee in My Name ... Thy tears are angels' drink, and are very wine and honey to them. Therefore ... be not irked with me on earth ... 'Jesus is my love'" (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, 65).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**John Calvin** (1509–64) underlines that as a caring pastor Paul did not want the Thessalonians to think that he had deserted them in a time of emergency. He writes, "It is not the part of a father to desert his children in the midst of such distresses" (*Commentary*, 33). The word "bereaved" shows them his affection. His desire to see them was "not a sudden heat," which may soon cool, but a steadfast purpose. When "Satan hindered him" it may have been an ambush on the part of the Jews, as in Acts 20:3. Calvin observes, "Whenever the wicked molest us, they fight under Satan's banner and are his instruments for harassing us," especially if we are working in the cause of the gospel (34). Nevertheless this could not have occurred if God had not permitted it: "God retains supreme authority." Because the readers are Paul's hope and joy, he must "necessarily desire" their presence. Paul gloried only in God, but "we are allowed to glory in all God's favours" (35). Calvin writes: "It was inconvenient and distressing for him [Paul] to be without Timothy. It was therefore a token of rare affection" that he did not refuse to deprive himself of this comfort (37).

The Thessalonians cannot regard themselves as exempt from bearing the cross. This is "inseparable" from our being Christians. Paul also tells them (v. 5) that all temptations are to be dreaded. Satan "never ceases to ambush us on all sides, and to lay snares for us" (37). Yet Timothy has reported back, and Paul has experienced great joy. Again, Paul speaks of their faith and love (v. 6). Calvin comments, "In these two words he comprehends briefly the sum of true piety" (39). He also observes, "All pastors can learn from this what kind of link should exist between them and the church" (40). They are happy if all goes well with the church; they pine with grief if they see the church in decay. So Paul approaches vv. 9–13: "How can we thank God enough?" (v. 9). "Night and day" show his persistence in prayer (v. 10). Paul credits the same role to God and to Christ: "He speaks of both in the same terms" (41). He prays that God will give them holiness, and fill them with love. Calvin sees purity and love as "the perfection of the Christian life" (41). He urges that Paul wants us to "make progress in our relationship with God ... until it captures our whole heart" (41).

Calvin acknowledges that Satan hindered Paul's journey plans, as in 1 Thess. 2:18 (*Institutes* 1.17.11; tr. Beveridge, 1.194). His second reference to 2:20, reflects what we saw in Anselm: Dan. 12:3 predicts that the wise "shall shine as the brightness of the firmament." "Abounding in love" seems to mean "that the law sounds

on our ears without profit” (1 Thess. 3:12; *Institutes* 2.5.6; tr. Beveridge, 1.278). This may seem to make a different point from the text, but Calvin is speaking here of the ineffectiveness of Satanic attacks. This is clinched by Calvin’s fourth reference to our passage. In 3:17, law and gospel are reconciled, and in section 15 righteousness and life proceed from the paternal kindness of God, to establish “the perfection of saints.” He aims that “He may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father” (1 Thess. 3:13; *Institutes* 3.1.15; tr. Beveridge, 2.118).

**Heinrich Bullinger** (1504–75), the Swiss Reformer, was influenced by Melancthon, Luther, and Zwingli, and succeeded Zwingli as chief pastor at Zürich. Paul’s delight that the Thessalonians show faith and love (3:6) and his prayer that they may “abound in love” (3:12) calls to mind Bullinger’s comment about “love, which . . . joins together the members of the body ecclesiastical mutually among themselves” (*Of the Holy Catholic Church*, 306). He comments, “After faith, the only mark of the Church is love, a bond that most firmly binds together all the members” (306). Its source is heavenly (307). Bullinger expounds the Reformation view that a succession of prophets, apostles, and pastors do not guarantee a true church, but the word of God issuing in faith and love (309–25).

**Estius** (1542–1613), Catholic chancellor of Douai, paraphrases Paul’s longing to see his converts face to face (1 Thess. 2:17–20; *Commentarii*, 2, *D. Pauli Epistolae*, 163–4). The converts remain his joy or crown of glory, especially at the coming of Christ (564). Because of the readers’ need, he was content to remain alone in Athens, and to send Timothy to them (3:1–2; 565). They are not to be surprised that they face tribulation (566). Yet Timothy reports good news of their faith and love (3:6; 567). Paul is almost beside himself with utter joy, in spite of his trials. James 1:2 enjoins, “Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (568). If there is anything lacking in faith, it has to be repaired (Greek, *katartizein*; v. 10; 568); Estius compares the word in Matt. 4:21, “mending their nets.” Paul prays that the readers may increase in mutual love (v. 12; 569). Finally, he speaks of the second advent of Christ, with reference to “the coming day” in Zech. 14:1. This contains no anti-Reformation polemic, and gives cross-references to other biblical writings.

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) calls this passage Paul’s “defence,” to assure the readers that his absence was enforced (*Commentary*, 3.739). Paul looks to the “crown” that he will receive at the last day. 1 Thess. 3:1–5 shows how Paul sent Timothy “out of his great care for the Thessalonians” (739). He had warned them about tribulations: “A faithful minister will not only tell the people of the crown, but of the cross of Christ” (740). He feared Satan and his work as tempter (v. 5). Poole observes, “The faithfulness and constancy of a people is the great comfort of their teachers” (740; v. 7). The apostle’s thanks to God for Timothy’s report “was beyond what he could . . . express.” Paul therefore prays with “assiduity.” It would be too much to expect a perfect faith from the readers. Everyone’s faith is defective. Paul wants to make it complete (v. 10). Paul

addresses his prayer both to God the Father and Christ (v. 11). Poole comments, “We have an argument that Christ is God, else he could not be the object of Divine worship” (741). Paul prays for “overflowing abundance” in love (v. 12), and for holiness, of which love is part (v.13). Poole comments, “Where love is wanting, the heart is not established” (741).

**Samuel Crossmann** (1624–84), dean of Bristol, was greatly influenced by George Herbert and his work *The Temple*. He is best known today for his hymns and meditations on the passion of Christ. He often used paradox, such as the “Prince of Life” is “slain.” He uses word play: “love unknown ... loveless ... lovely.” Like Paul, overawed in trying to give thanks, he exclaims, “O who am I?” in his hymn of love. He writes:

My song is love unknown  
My Saviour’s love to me,  
Love to the loveless shown,  
That they might lovely be.  
O who am I,  
That for my sake,  
My Lord should take  
Frail flesh and die?

*(The Young Man’s Meditation)*

J. R. Watson comments on this: “Astonishment, paradox, irony, exclamation, all turn to praise at the extraordinary events that the hymn recalls” (*An Annotated Anthology of Hymns*, 110).

## The Eighteenth Century

**Nahum Tate** (1652–1715) and **Nicholas Brady** (1659–1726) wrote of the ups and downs of the Christian life, in a way which reflects Paul in our passage. Paul records extraordinary swings of circumstances which begin with enforced separation, continue with frustrations as “Satan blocked our way,” yet the converts remain his “glory and joy” (2:17–20). Paul reaches the end of his tether, and his patience runs out (3:1–5; see also 2 Cor. 1: 9). Timothy’s news lifts him then to joy and thankfulness beyond all expression. He feels alive again (3:6–10). He glories in God and pours out his heart to him (3:11–13). What gives better expression to this than the hymn composed in 1694 by Tate and Brady?

Through all the changing scenes of life,  
In trouble and in joy,

The praises of my God shall still  
My heart and tongue employ.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 290)

**William Law** (1686–1761), spiritual writer and nonjuror, wrote *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. He insists on humility and self-denial, but most of all on prayer and devotion throughout each day. When he turns to intercession, much of it reflects Paul’s thought in 1 Thess. 3:9–10, 12–13. He writes: “If a father were daily making particular prayers to God, that he would please to inspire his children with true piety [and] great humility ... what could be more likely to make the father exemplary in these virtues? ... If a father considered himself an intercessor with God for his children, ... what more likely means to make him aspire after every degree of holiness? ... How tenderly, how religiously, would such a father converse with his children, whom he considered as his little spiritual flock?” (*A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, 301).

**John Wesley** (1703–91) notes that in 2:17–19 Paul’s passion flows like a torrent, but represents more than a passing emotion (*Notes on the New Testament*, 689). The hindering by Satan is that of persecuting Jews. Suffering and tribulation (3:3) represent “the very design and contrivance of God himself for the trial and increase of our faith and all other graces” (690). In all the prayer is addressed both to God and to Christ.

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88), among the greatest hymn-writers of the eighteenth century, would have endorsed Paul’s language about suffering and tribulation. The tension or “provocation” between a “politically correct” stress on absence of military images of conflict and more traditional conflict imagery may be noted. Charles Wesley wrote:

Soldiers of Christ arise,  
And put your armour on,  
Strong in the strength which God supplies,  
Through his eternal Son.

Wesley complemented this military symbolism with such hymns as “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild” and “Love Divine, all loves excelling.”

**William Cowper** (1731–1800) experienced a sense of frustration akin to Paul’s when the latter recalled, “Satan hindered us.” Cowper, who was a dedicated Christian, suffered from acute depression. About to enter an asylum, he wrote:

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform ...  
Behind a knowing providence  
He hides a smiling face.

## The Nineteenth Century

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93) shows how Paul’s spiritual concern for his converts is inseparable from his love for them as people. They are not simply “souls” to be won, there is “a personal love for each one” (*Thessalonians*, 63). Absence has not weakened it. The singular *egō men Paulos* is emphatic (v. 18), expressing Paul’s personal desire, whatever Timothy and Silas may think. It is “not certain” what Paul means by “Satan hindered us; perhaps some obstruction” (64). By calling the readers his crown, Paul does not imply that he expects a reward for converting them. The logic is more like that of 2 Cor. 3:2, “You are our epistle.” In 2 Tim. 4:8, “the crown of righteousness” is for “all who love his appearing.” Like Olshausen, Jowett closely links 3:1–5 with 2:17–20. Jowett discusses the compatibility with the narrative in Acts, to which he offers a solution (66). “Affliction” (Greek, *thlipsesin*) probably means *persecutions*, as Paul had predicted. “All Christians must have felt the state of persecution natural to them” (67). The good report from Timothy adds comfort to Paul’s affliction. For Paul these represent “a sort of death” while being “raised to life” (69).

Jowett rightly compares 2 Cor. 1:8–10 and Gal. 2:20, where this develops into the principle of dying and being raised with Christ. Hence Paul prays “exceedingly” that he may come to them to make up what is wanting (v. 10), and that “God Himself” may guide him to Thessalonica (70). He prays for their increased love and holiness (vv. 12–13). Jowett concludes with a comment on “systematic persecution,” and observes, “We can scarcely form an idea of its [Christianity’s] first difficulties. Everywhere it had to encounter the fierce spirit of fanaticism” (71). The Roman government may have been indifferent to opinions about religion, but would act when a whole city was in uproar. Hence persecution was violent in the earliest years; then cooled off as the caring and peace-loving nature of the gospel was understood; but arose again more sharply in later times (71–3).

**Gottlieb Lünemann** (1819–94) believed, with Olshausen, that 1 Thess. 2:17 began a new section of the epistle. Circumstances constrained Paul to leave Thessalonica (Acts 17:10). But “apostolic Christian love, which cared and laboured” was concerned about how the readers viewed the situation (*Thessalonians*, 76). Hence Paul underlines “the pain of separation from friends and the desire to return” (78). Lünemann argues that 1 Thessalonians would have been written probably half a year after his departure (79). He observes, “This earnest desire to return is founded on the esteem of the apostle for his readers” (80).

Paul’s sense of consolation runs from 3:6–13 (93). But it is not unmixed with continuing affliction (Greek, *thlipsis*), which Schott ascribes to Paul’s adversaries in Corinth, as well as poverty and hard labor there (*Epistolae Pauli*

*ad Thessalonicenses et Galatas*). The sense of 3:7, Lünemann argues, is: “We were comforted *during*, or *in spite of*, the heavy burden of necessity and tribulation *which weigh upon us*” (95; his emphasis). These were experienced as a kind of death (v. 8). Yet Paul finds “all joy,” “a joy in its totality,” in the report of the readers’ faith and love (97). Perhaps their “deficiencies” solely concerned their confusion about the second advent (98). Paul prays, therefore, for himself and his converts. “To abound” (Greek, *pleonazein*) is used first transitively and then intransitively. In v. 13 “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10; 100). The verse expresses the final aim, ultimately that of “the blessed fellowship of all the saints of God” (102). He implicitly rejects the notions of “holy ones” as angels.

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) allows himself 44 pages on the passage in his *Lectures* (1884). He quotes Goethe on “heart vs body”:

Gar freundliche Gesellschaft leistet uns  
Ein ferner Freund, wenn wir ihn glücklich wissen.  
(96)

This heart knowledge and the brevity of separation made the desire to return all the stronger. The word “hindered” is a metaphor which in military terms may mean “the breaking up of roads, the destroying of bridges, and the interposing of various obstacles” (97). In 2 Cor. 12:7 Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” is “a messenger of Satan.” Meanwhile the Thessalonians were “a credit to him [Paul] in the sight of God and men ... his chaplet of ceaseless rejoicing” (101). “The same crown is offered to us all” (103).

Hutchison begins a new lecture with 3:1–5. The theme is Paul’s love for his friends. He writes, “The unconquerable faith of his [Paul’s] heart craved for the interchange of human affection” (106). Every notion of Paul as a loner is wide of the mark. Hence to be “alone” entailed a sacrifice, a “self-abnegation” (107). Timothy is to bring “firmness” to the readers, not to be moved by afflictions. This is true even if Hutchison argues for Timothy’s special “tenderness” (110). Paul’s comment that suffering is the lot of Christians shows the importance of firmness when we face it. Tribulation can strengthen faith. Hutchison quotes Bishop John Jewel (sixteenth century) as saying, “Frankincense, when it is put in the fire, giveth a greater perfume; spice, if it be pounded, smelleth the sweeter; the earth, when it is torn up by the plough, becometh more fruitful” (112). Timothy brings back his report of the readers’ faith and love (3:6–10). Hutchison provides an anonymous quotation:

Such perfect friends are faith and love,  
That neither lives where both are not.  
(117)

The desire to meet, Paul learns, was not just on his side, but also on theirs: “Love was the bond uniting them” (118). Hutchison compares Jacob’s hearing the news that Joseph was alive. The exhortation to stand fast conveys a military image of conflict (see 1 Cor. 16:13). Paul’s sense that thanks and praise lie beyond adequate expression (vv. 9–10) reminds us of the hymn by Joseph Addison (1672–1719) “When all Thy mercies, O my God, / My rising soul surveys.” The last verse reads:

Through all eternity to Thee  
A joyful song I’ll raise  
For, oh! Eternity’s too short  
To utter all Thy praise.

(122; *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 517)

Hutchison points out that prayer “is an instance of a very marked characteristic of the Pauline epistles” (127). “God Himself” stands in contrast to human agency, which had been frustrated. This reflects Jer. 10:23, “The way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (129).

**James Denney** (1856–1917) heads 2:17–3:5 “Absence and Longing” (*Thessalonians*, 99–113). Such is the power of the gospel, that Paul established a relationship of intimacy and strong affection with the new converts. Months later, his heart is sore for their presence. Denney comments, “This is one of the ways in which the gospel enriches life” (100). It embraces many who would otherwise be empty and isolated. No father ever loved his children more tenderly or fervently, Denney claims. He longs that the Thessalonians understand this. He envisaged the troubles that they faced (111). Denney considers 1 Thess. 3:6–13 under the title “Love and Prayers.” As we noted, Bengel saw 1 Thessalonians as “characterized by a kind of unmixed sweetness” (117). We must imagine this letter read aloud to the little congregation as it warmed their hearts. “The burning words of this letter kindled the flame of love” (119). “No one could live among them and not feel that unseen things were read to their souls ... The common faith had its most original exhibition in love” (120). Now Paul expresses joy and praise beyond words (123), and pours out his heart in gratitude. Denney concludes, “A cold heart is not unblameable ... But love sanctifies ... [We] escape from our sins by escaping from ourselves ... Love is the fulfilling of the law” (129–31). Denney may typify the nineteenth century rather than the twentieth when he asks: “Where has this supreme motive gone in the modern Church?” (131).

# 1 Thessalonians

4:1–12

## **The Call to Holiness, Especially to Holiness and Love in Personal Relationships**

### **Introduction and Overview**

The adverb “finally” or “for the rest” (Greek, *loipon*, v. 1) suggests a hinge to another topic. Paul turns to exhortation, or to what is called *paranesis*. *Paranesis* aims to persuade or to exhort, usually in contrast to doctrine or to description. Much of the exhortation on ethics shares common features with Jewish synagogue homilies, especially synagogue sermons to God-fearers or inquiring

Gentiles. It may even overlap with values among the “best” Stoic philosophers. But the words “in the Lord Jesus” show that the *motivation* is Christian. It is not new material to the readers. This is clear from v. 2, “You know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.”

“We ask and urge you” (v. 1, NRSV) does not merely repeat the same form of the request. The first word means here *to request*; the second (Greek, *parakaloumen*) means *to appeal*. Paul appeals to the readers to continue to live as he had instructed them in his preaching, and “to please God” (vv. 1–2). The heart of the exhortation comes in v. 3: “This is God’s will: your sanctification.” The Greek word used is *hagiasmos*, which can denote a process or a result (Danker, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 10). The verb from which it derives, *hagiazō*, to make holy, occurs in the Septuagint or LXX for the Hebrew *q-d-sh*. *Holy* has a primary sense of “other” or “separate,” reflecting God’s “otherness” or transcendence. But when it denotes a process, as here, it also has moral connotations of a purity of life that reflects God and his ideal for his people.

Paul’s allusion to his preaching and moral instruction during his visit confirms that the readers would understand this. He had “received” this teaching from the pre-Pauline apostolic church; it was not a creation of his own. The NRSV tends to blur this technical use of the *passing on a tradition* by translating the Greek *parelabete* as “you learned.” The Thessalonians already follow this rule, but Paul appeals to them to abound in following it.

A controversial issue of interpretation turns on how to translate *skeuos* (*vessel*) (v. 4). The literal translation remains “vessel,” but does the clause mean “to control your own *body* in holiness” (NRSV; or “mastery over his body,” NEB, REB), or might it mean “how to take a *wife* for himself in holiness” (RSV)? Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, Theodoret, Calvin, Beza, Grotius, Clericus, and Olshausen, interpret *skeuos* as *body* (Tertullian seems to imply *both* meanings). Basil, Chrysostom, Theodore, Jerome, Augustine, Aquinas, de Wette, and Jowett, interpret it as *wife*. More recent commentators are divided. Ben Witherington provides six reasons in favor of “body”; but eight reasons in favor of “wife” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 114–15). In favor of “body,” we can cite Witherington, Rigaux, Morris, Whiteley, and others; in favor of “wife” we can cite Ernest Best (*First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 161–3), Maurer, and tentatively Abraham Malherbe (*Letters to the Thessalonians*, 226–7). I. Howard Marshall and F. F. Bruce see much to commend both views and adhere to the literal meaning *vessel* (Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 107–9; Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 83–4).

The strongest arguments in favor of *body* are: (1) Paul is addressing the *whole* Christian community, including the unmarried. (2) “Body” occupies an increasing importance in Pauline theology (1 Cor. 6:12–20 and Rom. 12:1). “Body” has a special place in Paul’s thought. Ernst Käsemann asserts that for Paul “body” means “that piece of the world which we ourselves are and for

which we bear responsibility, because it was the earliest gift of our Creator to us ... It signifies man ... in his ability to communicate” (*New Testament Questions of Today*, 135). Käsemann concludes, “In the bodily obedience of the Christian ... the lordship of Christ finds visible expression and ... only when this ... takes personal shape in us does the whole thing become credible as Gospel message” (135). This reaches its climax in the resurrection of the body, and explains why everything that the Christian does in or with the body is of strategic importance. The “body” is the “Temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19). (3) *Vessel* means *body* in 2 Cor. 4:7, as it often does in Jewish ethics.

Strong reasons, however, suggest that *vessel* means *wife*. (1) The greatest problem with *body* is that the Greek *ktasthai* means to *acquire*, to *gain possession of*. F. W. Danker places the alternative meaning “to gain control over his own body” in parentheses as a possible, though less likely, alternative to *wife* (*Greek–English Lexicon*, 572). (2) Paul has amplified “holiness” as including the avoidance of sexual immorality (Greek, *porneia*). In connection with this, he singles out *grasping*, *defrauding*, or *a yearning for what is off-limits* (Greek, *pleonektein*, v. 6) for special censure. This may include sexual immorality, lust, or adultery.

Both alternatives are possible, and neither disrupts Paul’s argument. If we were forced to choose, we would suggest that Käsemann’s arguments about *body* and an appeal to the entire audience are sufficiently impressive to swing the case in favor of *body* (NRSV, REB, and NJB). Whichever view we adopt, Paul wants Christians to behave “not like the Gentiles, who do not know God” (v. 5), and not to lust after what lies beyond the boundary of legitimacy. This further anticipates 1 Cor. 10:7–13, where Paul warns the readers against sexual immorality (v. 8) as a “high stakes” example of “craving” (Greek, *epithumia*) for what is not ours (see Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 733–49; Collier, “That We Might Not Crave Evil,” 55–75). This can also take the form of “exploiting” fellow Christians (v. 6). This again anticipates another parallel in 1 Corinthians. 1 Cor. 6:1–8 is only superficially about “lawsuits” (v. 7). Since a *civil* court would readily fall prey to bribes, only a Christian with power, money, or influence could offer a bribe to the judge, and would seek to exploit a fellow Christian by dragging him or her to court.

Paul concludes with a reminder that God will avenge the weak or oppressed, and that Christians are called also to brotherly love (v. 9). Greek has a single word for “brotherly love” (*philadelphia*), denoting mutual love between Christians, or love of the brotherhood and sisterhood of Christians. The converts found new bonds within the church. The readers are encouraged to offer “more of the same thing.” None may sponge on the generosity of others, but each is to contribute by their own work. “Independent” (v. 12) does not mean Stoic self-sufficiency, but not being a parasite on others. Even manual work must not be despised, as it often was among the Greeks.

## The Patristic Era

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) quotes 1 Thess. 4:3–8 in full, beginning, “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification” (v. 3) up to “who has also given his Holy Spirit to you” (v. 8). The context of his chapter is Basilides’s attempt to refute the idea of martyrdom. The Gnostic had argued that to fall under afflictions implies that the sufferer must have sinned. Clement replies by (1) citing the sufferings and death of Christ; (2) arguing that God has sanctified the saints; and (3) asking whether those who persecuted the martyrs were actually doing right (*Stromata* 4.12; ANF 2.425). This is clearly a broader application than the text, but suggests a theological principle relevant to the issue of the times. He retains Paul’s word “vessel” (v. 4). Clement possibly included a second quotation, this time of v. 9, “You yourselves have been taught by God” (*The Instructor* 1.6; ANF 2.216). The term *children*, Clement argued, may sometimes apply to Christians, but this does not necessarily imply that they are immature. God knows “whom he has called and saved,” and these are “taught by God” (1.6; 216).

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) argues that the shorter epistles of Paul are valuable (see above). In response to Marcion he urged that they discuss creation, the status of the Jews, and the call to Christians to be holy and “not like the Gentiles” (v. 5). He explicitly quoted 1 Thess. 4:3–5, and later 4:15–17, beginning: “This is the will of God” (v. 3; *Against Marcion* 5.15; ANF 3.462). He understands *vessel* (v. 4) once to refer to “the honourable state of matrimony,” even if celibacy is to be preferred. But Tertullian also notes Paul’s emphasis on the resurrection, and includes a second reference to 1 Thess. 1:4. Here he is more ambiguous about the term *vessel*, veering towards the “body” interpretation as well (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 16; ANF 3.556). Paul also spoke of the same thing as *the outward man* (2 Cor. 4:16), *the clay* which became a human being. The meaning, he seems to suggest, depends on context. Tertullian quotes 1 Thess. 4:3–5 for a third time. Again, he begins: “This is the will of God, your sanctification,” and quotes the three verses up to “who do not know God” (v. 5). Here Tertullian is arguing for *Paul’s consistency*. He consistently urges “modesty, chastity, and sanctity,” as against “luxury, lasciviousness, and lust” (*On Modesty* 17; ANF 4.92).

**Basil the Great** (c. 330–379) refers to our passage several times. He refers first to the famous crux of interpretation in v. 4: “That he knows how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour.” He interprets it as “a lawful marriage,” on the assumption that *vessel* means *wife* (*Letter* 60, *To Diodorus* 5; NPNF2 8.214). He seems to refer to 4:11, “I implore you to stop at home ... quietly doing Christ’s work” (*Letter* 126, *To the Ascetics* 4; NPNF2 8.269); and to v. 12 (*Letter* 101, *Consolatory*; NPNF2 8.185).

**Ambrosiaster** (d. c. 380) writes that Paul enjoined his readers to walk before God to abound even more in following the precepts which they already know. They are to keep their *vessel* (*vas*, v. 4) in holiness and honor (*Commentarius in Epistolas Paulinas* 3.224). To please God entails “keeping their body unspotted” (*corpora sua intaminata custodiant*, 224), for God is an avenger on this matter (v. 6). Christians adopt God’s name; they should not be like the Gentiles. God has called us not to impurity (*immunditia*) but to holiness (v.7). Whoever disobeys this despises not a human being, but God, who has given you his Holy Spirit (225). The Holy Spirit is given that we may live holy lives. Again, he speaks of bringing *the body* under control (225). Their mutual affection for one another has been “taught by God himself.”

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) comments that Paul exhorts his readers “in the Lord Jesus” (vv. 1–2), as if he were not “of sufficient credit to exhort” (*Homily* 5; NPNF1 13.344). He writes in the same way in 2 Cor. 5:20: “God entreats you through us.” The received tradition included both words and actions. The readers were not only to avoid evil, but also to do good. Chrysostom urges the key point in v. 3: “This is God’s will, your sanctification.” Impurity, like the mire in which a pig may wallow, he comments, can spread, and make everything unclean. On the crux, *vessel* (v. 4), Chrysostom understands this to mean *wife*. He argues concerning vv. 5–6, “To each man God has assigned a wife ... intercourse with another is transgression” (*Homily* 5; NPNF1 13.345). Marriage must not be “invaded.” Chrysostom argues that men often punish a wife if she has been unfaithful, but the converse applies to men. God avenges not so much the man or woman who has been “defrauded,” as avenges “Himself.” A man is bound to his wife. He quotes Christ’s words in Matt. 5:32, “Every one that puts away his wife ...” Chrysostom sees vv. 9–12 as a logical consequence of vv. 1–8. If a man should love his wife, mutual and brotherly love should also spread widely among the Christian family. He quotes the maxim, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” “Working with hands” may include “spiritual work,” as well as manual work. The main point is not to be “shamed by begging,” or seeking only to receive (*Homily* 6; NPNF1 13.348).

**Jerome** (c. 345–420) quotes “possess his vessel in sanctification and honour” (v. 4; Jerome, *Letters* 128.3; NPNF2 6.259). He clearly regards Paul’s meaning as “having a wife, and enveloped in the skin of matrimony.” Such a married person was not to seek to be celibate or single again. He has lost “eternal chastity,” and must “drink of his own wells.” Jerome regarded marriage as a second best to celibacy, but as legitimate. He refers to 1 Thess. 4:7: “God does not call us to impurity, but to holiness” (*Against Jovinianus* 1.16; NPNF2 6.359). He sees vv. 4–8 as all concerning marriage. Paul does not forbid marriage, he admits, but implies that the single state is better. Even remarriage is not sinful, if the first spouse has died (1 Cor. 7: 37–8).

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) insists that under the constraints of persecution the readers must remain “inviolable” (*Commentarii in Epistolas B. Pauli* 2.21). Timothy has reported that the readers stand firm in the face of adversity. Paul asserts, “This is God’s will, your sanctification,” and “abstain from immorality.” Timothy had reported that they were confused, and some were living licentiously: “Having, to be sure, their wives, they were not content with their wives,” and mingle adulterously with “the wives of others” (*etiam alienis uxoribus*; *Commentarii* 22). He then quotes v. 4, “possess your own vessel in holiness” with the comment, “He said ‘your own vessel,’ naming his own wife” (22). The fallen behaves as if he were not already joined to his wife (23). He shows inordinate desire (*concupiscentiae*) because he treats other women as if they were his wife. But this is like the conduct of Gentiles who are ignorant of God, and defrauds his brother (v. 6). For it is not lawful to take his brother’s wife (24). God will therefore be an avenger. He has called us to holiness and to a heavenly hope. To disregard this, therefore, is to despise not a human person, but God. “The ordinary, earthly body will arise as a body belonging to the Spirit” (*Commentarii* 2.25). It is the first-fruits of the Spirit, to which we are called in this hope. Hence Paul wrote about brotherly love. Theodore succeeds in interpreting vessel as *wife*; but also in saying something positive about *the body*.

**Augustine** (354–430) quotes in full “how to possess his vessel in sanctification ... Gentiles who know not God” (1 Thess. 4:4). He speaks of “bodily appetite,” of “bodily pleasures” and of the reproductive organs as being “stimulated by the heat of lust” (*City of God* 14.16; NPNF1 2.275–6). *Vessel* may mean *body* (v. 4), and Augustine devotes a chapter to “the evil of lust” and “sexual uncleanness.” He quotes 1 Thess. 4:3–5, beginning: “This is the will of God, even your sanctification” and ending “Gentiles who know not God.” Here “vessel” has also the meaning *wife*. He declares, “The married believer, therefore, must not only *not* use another man’s vessel, which is what they do who lust after others’ wives; but he must know that even his own vessel is not to be possessed in the desire of carnal concupiscence” (*Of Marriage and Concupiscence* 9.8; NPNF1 5.267). Augustine argues that the evil of lust does not take away the good of marriage; he was more positive about marriage than Jerome. He asserted, following Paul, that “original sin” does not render marriage evil (v. 5). Augustine again quotes v. 4, “in honour and sanctification,” where he clearly understands *vessel* to mean *wife*. He asserts, “The husband for his part loves his wife ... in sanctification ... as a co-heir of grace” (*Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 1.21; NPNF1 6.253). Finally, he quotes 1 Thess. 4:9–10, “As touching love of the brothers ... taught by God ... in all Macedonia,” supposedly under the heading of “the righteousness of God and the righteousness of the Law” (*On the Grace of Christ* 1.14.13; NPNF1 5.222). The connection here may be tenuous.

**Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430) notes that Paul urges the readers to increase their faith, and to avoid incontinence of a sexual nature, “managing” (*attingere*) their *bodies* in a holy way (*Expositions*, 2.429). But he also urges great restraint with respect to women, which is the point of v. 3b. Specifically on the word *vessel* (*vas*) he argues that each should keep his *body* chaste (429; v. 4). He cites the parallel of Corinth, and the evil of serving unrestrained sexual desire, like the Gentiles who do not know the love of God (430; v. 5). Readers must strive not to defraud their brothers. God is the avenger not only of sexual immorality, but also of “transgression” against God (v. 6). Pelagius comments, “It is not permitted brazenly to receive the body of Christ” (430). “Holiness” reminds us of the life of Christ, “who sanctified himself, even as he is holy” (1 John 3:3). Christ said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another” (John 13:34). Therefore Paul urged the readers to show this brotherly love (v. 11; 431).

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) follows Chrysostom in observing that Paul writes “through the Lord Jesus” (v. 1) “to make the exhortation creditable” (*Commentary*, 2.115). This also “refutes the blasphemy of Arius and Eunomius” on the status of Christ. Paul explicates in v. 3 what he means by “sanctification,” namely abstinence from “fornication.” On v. 4, he declares, “Some commentators took ‘your own vessel’ to be their partner, but I think he referred by this to each one’s *body*: he is not making the requirement only of the married” (115; my emphasis). He warns the readers against covetousness. This referred to adultery, for the man who obtrudes “into another marriage” defrauds a brother. Against such a sin the Lord is an avenger, and as Paul mentioned elsewhere, he is “a just judge.” God called Christians to holiness. Christians must practice “self-control” (116). This is the word of the all-holy Spirit (vv. 1–8). In vv. 9–12, Theodoret continues, “Some met the needs of the needy generously, while others neglected their work on account of these people’s generosity” (116). In other words, some relied on others to meet the needs of the community. It is shameful to live in idleness, and to impose on the generosity of others.

## The Medieval Period

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) follows Theodore of Mopsuestia almost slavishly, often using the same Latin phrases (vv. 1–2). He stresses the need for humility, righteousness, love, and patience. He then quotes v. 3, “This is the will of God, your sanctification,” as most predecessors have done. But he asserts that to maintain “the honour of the vessel” means our *body* (*Opera Omnia*, PL 112/6, 550). The holiness of Christians therefore presents a contrast with those

controlled by excessive passions. By implication he associated “body” also with resurrection, and the resurrection of Jesus.

**Lanfranc** (c. 1010–89) writes with the usual emphasis of the fathers on v. 3: “This is the will of God ...” He stresses the need for absence from, or avoidance of, passions of yearning (*passio desiderii*), and the inverse calling to purity (*In D. Pauli Epistolas Comentarii*; PL 150.335). Such a precept is an implication of Christians receiving the Holy Spirit (336; v. 8). Idleness is inappropriate.

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) cautions the readers “to please God through the forming of good intentions” (*Commentary* 28–9). He declares, “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance” (2 Cor. 9:8) and “The commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light” (Prov. 6:23–9). Paul spoke of receiving instructions from the Lord and of passing them on. Like virtually every other commentator, Thomas pauses at v. 3: “This is the will of God, your sanctification.” The readers must avoid “carnal vices” or “inordinate desire,” especially if it entails “lust in regard to a woman who is not their wife” (30). Thomas compared Tobit 4:12, “Beware ... of immorality.” On *vessel* Aquinas observes, “That is his *wife*” (30). The heathen desire immediate pleasures, instead of those of the future life. However, “the proper use of marriage ... is for the good of the offspring, or for fulfilling an obligation; and so marriage may be without sin” (30). Outside the bonds of marriage, “the action [intercourse] becomes a mortal sin” (31). “Let marriage be held in honour among all ... God will judge the immoral and adulterous” (Heb. 13:4).

Vengeance (4:7) is justifiable, for immorality is contrary to God’s gifts to us (*Commentary*, 31). Thomas referred also to Rom. 8:30, “Those whom he predestined, he also called.” Vices “are opposed to the Holy Spirit, who is given to us” (31). To disregard this injunction is to disregard God (see Heb. 10:28). As far as “brotherly love” was concerned (v. 9), the Thessalonians were generous (32). The rich gave away much, but as a result “the poor idly depended on their benefits without looking for work” (32). That the church has already been “taught by God” (v. 9b) alluded to the principle in the Old Testament: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18); and in the New Testament: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another” (John 13:34). Paul criticizes those who are idle (v. 11). He compares his own toil and labor when he was with them in 2 Thess. 3:7, and refers to work in Prov. 24:27 and Sirach 33:27. He quotes from 2 Thess. 3:10, “If any one will not work, let him not eat” (33). Paul, Thomas asserts, gives two reasons for this: (1) work gives a good example to “outsiders” (v. 12), and (2) it helps us to avoid covetousness.

Aquinas quotes 1 Thess. 4:3 when he is discussing “Whether God wills things apart from Himself” (*Summa Theologiae* 1, qu. 19, art. 2). In 1 Thess. 4:3 “the things apart from Himself” include the sanctification of the Thessalonians, and things “for their own good.” On v. 6 the allusion may not be explicit, but Aquinas

discusses “fraud” as implying *craftiness*. His classic example is 1 Cor. 6:1, “Why not allow yourselves to be defrauded?” (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 55, art. 5). “We renounce the things of dishonesty” (2 Cor. 4:2; qu. 55, art. 3; see also art. 4). This leads on to the maxim about work in 2 Thess. 3:10 (qu. 55, art. 6). Thomas takes this further with reference to 1 Thess. 4:11, “Work with your hands as we have commanded you” (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 187, art. 3). Here he cites Augustine to the effect that even monks and those in religious orders should work, even do manual work.

**Dante Alighieri** (1265–1321) was a prior of Florence, and a poet. He wrote *The Divine Comedy* in his last years, in exile from Florence. He read Albert, Aquinas, and Bonaventura. In his *Inferno*, an idealized Virgil, Beatrice, and Bernard guide him through the gloom of the underworld. He passes through Circle One, to enter Circle Two:

I learned that those condemned to this brand  
Of torture are called carnal sinners,  
Those who put reason under lust’s command ...  
Semiramis chose  
A life of lust and corruption,  
Then tried to wipe the disgrace away  
By legalizing his own kind of degeneration.  
(*Inferno* 5.37–9, 54–7)

Dante further writes:

Oh justice of God! What an enormity  
Of strange torture and penance!  
Why do we so waste ourselves with iniquity?  
(7.19–21)

To the condemned belong even clergy, who have spent lives of greed or been undisciplined in their use of money. Paul refers to the vices in 1 Thess. 1:1–8 and in vv. 9–12, all with reference to the just God.

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Periods

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) quotes 1 Thess. 4:3, 7, in the course of expounding Heb. 12:14, “Follow holiness without which no man shall see the Lord” (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Early Theological Works*, 235). He also refers to 1 Thess. 4:5 in his exposition of 1 Tim. 2:15, “She shall be saved through child-bearing.” Commenting on the vocation of Christian wives, he writes, “A woman ought to

live in holiness, according to 1 Thess. 4:5, “not in the passion of lust” (*Luther’s Works*, 28: *Commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7 and 15, Lectures on 1 Timothy*, 280). He continues, “A man should be content with his own wife, for she is his own body, and, in relation to her, there should be reverence and holiness” (280). Both spouses should seek modesty, and sensibly manage affairs.

Luther predictably comments on Gal. 5:16, “You shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh . . . For the flesh lusts against the Spirit . . .” He writes, “‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’ . . . [is] the selfsame thing: to wit, that thou shouldst not obey the flesh” (*St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, 498). “They also that be married . . . are not without such carnal lust . . . Let everyone diligently examine himself . . . that the beauty or manners of another man’s wife pleaseth him better than of his own . . . Concupiscence of the flesh comprehendeth carnal lust, but not that only . . . [It] comprehendeth all other corrupt affections, wherewith the very faithful are infected” (498–9). The “works of the flesh” also include pride, hatred, covetousness, impatience, and other vices. But “carnal lusts” are the very opposite of brotherly love, and imply “contempt of God.” This ethic of “two ways” in Galatians runs closely in parallel with 1 Thess. 4:3–12. Luther repeats this point in his *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* (1522), and also in his *Answer to Latomus* (1521). Luther appeals to Romans 7 (“sin makes me captive”; v. 23), to 1 Cor. 7:5 (“incontinence”) and 1 Cor. 5:8, “the old leaven of malice and wickedness” (*Answer to Latomus*, in *Early Theological Works*, 353).

**Philip Melancthon** (1497–1560) also refers to Gal. 5:17, “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit . . .” Sin, he says, is more than a matter of “outward deeds.” Melancthon agrees with Luther that “the flesh” includes “carnal lust,” but also “the whole nature of man” (*Loci Communes Theologie* 132). He asserts that sin is “an innate force towards sinning . . . an intensely alive force in every part of us . . . the flame of lustful desire” (31–3).

**John Calvin** (1509–64). Calvin notes that the readers had already received practical teaching, but they should be “especially careful to make progress in the teaching they had received” (*Commentary*, 43). “Sanctification” (v. 3) entails “renouncing this world, clearing out the pollutions of the flesh, and offering ourselves to God in sacrifice” (44). Calvin then observes, “Nothing is more against holiness than the defilement of sexual immorality, which pollutes the *whole person*” (my emphasis). The readers are to clothe themselves with Christ (Rom. 13:14). On v. 4 Calvin equates the ambiguous *vessel* with *body*. Some people, he concedes, refer this to *wife*, but here Paul addressed “husbands and wives indiscriminately. There can be no doubt that he is talking about a person’s own *body*” (44; my emphasis).

The command in v. 6 prohibits wronging a Christian brother, but Chrysostom’s connecting the two in terms of the man’s *wife*, Calvin believes, “is too forced an exposition” (45). This refers simply to not injuring a fellow

Christian. It includes all unrighteous desires. The Lord will punish such evil, for some human beings “are so sluggish that unless they are wounded deeply they have no understanding about God’s judgement” (45). The following verse (v. 7) repeats the principle, but adds the point that to reject it is to reject God; who gives us his Holy Spirit (v. 8). Paul then passes to brotherly love (vv. 9–12). Even if they are making progress, the readers must desire to become even better. They must act “peacefully and without disturbance” (v. 11; 46). Intrusion into the lives of others causes disturbance. Again, manual labor is commended (v. 12), both to have enough money to live on, and to avoid the offense of idleness (47). Calvin also urges, “God hath not called us to uncleanness; . . . every man should possess his vessel in honour . . .” (1 Thess. 4:7; *Institutes* 3.23.13; tr. Beveridge, 2.236). 1 Thess. 4:3 finds its place among admonitions to purity (*Institutes* 3.16.2; tr. Beveridge, 2.100). Calvin also bases personal holiness on the holiness of God (Lev. 19:1; 1 Pet. 1:16; *Institutes* 3.6.2; tr. Beveridge, 2.3).

**Estius** (1542–1613) entitles the whole chapter, “He exhorts them to lead a holy life, and to do work.” The apostle has commended the readers for their faithfulness. But he exhorts them to perfect their Christian life. They already know these precepts (vv. 1–2). Like others, he comments at length in vv. 3 and 4, “This is the will of God, your sanctification.” The Thessalonians must abstain from impurity. He cites Matthew 5: “Whoever divorces his wife, except for the reason of fornication, commits adultery” (*In Omnes D. Pauli Epistolas*, 2.571–2). Verse 4, he says, explicates “sanctification.” *Vessel* means “his own *body*” (*proprium corpus*; 572; my emphasis). He appeals to 1 Sam. [1 Kings] 21:5, “The vessels of young men are holy,” as meaning “bodies of the young men.” He also appeals to Augustine, to Theodoret, to Oecumenius, to Rom. 12:1, and to 1 Cor. 6:20. But he recognizes that part of respecting the body is “to keep your own wife in holiness and honour” (572). For *body* retains its wider communal sense, as in 1 Corinthians 12. Chastity and continence must be observed. A man has power over the body of his wife, as 1 Cor. 7:4 enjoins. Verse 5 amplifies this by urging “not in excessive passions.” Faithfulness is confined to one’s wife, not like the Gentiles, who do not know God.

On v. 6, Estius points out, many of the Latin writers, including Ambrosiaster, Anselm, and Aquinas, interpreted wronging a Christian brother as fraud and injury, especially in business or commerce. The Greek words *pleonektein* and *pleonexia* mean *avarice*. The Greek *pragma* (v. 6; NRSV “in this matter”) *could* mean “in business” (*negotium*), but may well refer to abstaining from lust. The Greek interpreters appear to favor the latter. Paul confirms this in v. 7: “God did not call us to impurity, but to holiness.” We admit the judgment of God on these things (573–4). He will vindicate his word. Whoever disobeys, “despises not a human being, but despises God” (574). God may speak through human agents, and may give the words through the Holy Spirit (v. 8). This interpretation

has implications for the authority of the church, which would make the Reformers uneasy. Yet it does not violate exegesis. Estius then moves on to Paul's verses about brotherly love (vv. 9–12). Love is a consequence of holiness (575). The single Greek word is *philadelphia*. He compares Rom. 12: 9–10 and Hebrews 13. On this subject the readers have been taught by God. Again Paul uses a single word (Greek, *Theodidaktoi*). This fulfills the new covenant promise of Jeremiah. Paul commends the Thessalonians for their love and goodness to the Christian brothers and sisters, but admonishes the idle (576). Some must mind their own business, and undertake manual work. They should follow Paul's own example (577).

The poet **George Herbert** (1593–1633) was ordained as a Church of England priest. In “The Church-Porch” he attacks lust, indulgence, excess, greed, idleness and debauchery:

Beware of lust: it doth pollute and foul  
Whom God in Baptisme washt with his own blood.  
It blots thy lesson written in thy soul;  
The holy lines cannot be understood.  
    How dare those eyes upon a Bible look,  
    Much lesse towards God, whose lust is all their book! ...

Take not his name, who made thy mouth, in vain:  
It gets thee nothing, and hath no excuse.  
Lust and wine plead a pleasure, avarice gain:  
But the cheap swearer through his open sluce  
    Lets his soul runne for nought, as little fearing.  
    Were I an *Epicure*, I could hate swearing ...

Flie idlennesse, which yet thou canst not flie  
By dressing, mistressing, and complement.  
If those take up thy day the sunne will crie  
Against thee: for his light was onely lent.  
    God gave thy soul brave wings; put not those feathers  
    Into a bed, to sleep out all ill weathers.

(“The Church-Porch,” vv. 2, 10, 14; *Works*, 1–4)

**Jeremy Taylor** (1613–67), Anglican bishop and chaplain to the Royalist Army, enjoyed the patronage of Archbishop William Laud. His influential works include *Holy Living* (1650) and *Holy Dying* (1651). In *Holy Living* he warned that “sexual pleasure” disabled the Christian, “by yielding to that enemy with whom he must strive, if ever he will be crowned ... ‘He that striveth for masteries is temperate in all things’ (1 Cor. 9:25)” (“Sobriety,” 4; *Selected Writings*, 68). Under “Rules for Married Persons, or Matrimonial Chastity,” he

writes that married persons should keep mutual faith: “Married persons must keep such modesty and decency of treating each other, that they never force themselves into high and violent lusts” (3; 72). Matrimonial chastity must be “restrained and temperate” (4; 72).

Taylor, like Paul, also warns against greed and covetousness. He writes, “Never compare thy condition with those above thee, but, to secure thy content, look upon those thousands with whom thou wouldst not for any interest change thy fortune and condition” (“Contentedness,” 2; 75). Taylor then considers justice (or not defrauding) in business: “In making contracts, use not many words ... having fewer opportunities to deceive. Lie not at all ... Let your prices be according to that measure of good and evil which is established ... in the account of the wisest and most merciful men ... without scandal” (“Rules and Measures for Justice in Bargaining,” 1, 4; 84).

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) comments that vv. 1–2 are about “particular duties concerning their [the readers’] walking” (*Commentary*, 3.741). The next verse (v. 3) concerns holiness, with special reference to chastity, “either of persons married or unmarried” (742), both in heart, speech, and eye. Adultery was so common among the Gentiles that it was “judged as no sin.” It was prohibited to believers, as it was at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:20). It also finds expression in the seventh of the Ten Commandments and in 1 Cor. 6:9. Poole comments on v. 10, “By *vessel* some understood the *married wife*, who is called the weaker vessel in 1 Pet. 3:7; ... for ... marriage is honourable to all men (Heb. 3:4) ... Others by *vessel* understand *the body*, which is the vessel of the soul” (742). Poole also alludes to 1 Sam. 21:5, “The vessels of the young men, are holy.” Thus fornication is said above all other sins “to be a sin against the *body*, 1 Cor. 6:18” (742). The believer must keep the body chaste, to the honor and glory of God (1 Cor. 6:20; Rom. 12:1). The reference to lust anticipates Gal. 5:17, “The Spirit lusts against the flesh.” Paul also mentions Gentiles in Rom. 1:21. He uses both *body* and *wife* in this passage.

Some take “defraud” in v. 6 to extend to longing for a woman who is married to another. Others speak of justice in commerce, especially since Thessalonica was a city of great trade and merchandise. Sanctification includes observing “a due proportion betwixt the price and the commodity, considering it either in its natural worth, or in such circumstances as to make it more or less valuable; or to take advantage of another’s ignorance or necessities, to take unreasonable profit ... or go above due bounds ...” Poole continues: “To defraud [comes] ... out of a covetous mind” (742–3; see 2 Cor. 7:2). But in view of the context, it may also include “invading another’s bed, transgressing the bounds of marriage” (743). Whether we specify one way or the other, God is the avenger of such crossing of an ordained boundary. If we

reject the command, “It is not man but God, who is despised” (743). That is why Paul introduces the gift of the Spirit.

The final part of the passage (vv. 9–12) concerns brotherly love, “which is love upon a spiritual ground; to love saints as such.” The saints are God-taught, because of such passages as Isa. 54:13; Jer. 31:34; and 1 Jn. 2:26–7, and because God is love. To love constitutes an action, which becomes more important than simply professing love (v. 10). Paul condemns idleness, and urges each to live out his or her own calling. Poole compares 2 Thess. 3:12 and 1 Cor. 9:6. The phrase “with our hands” does not exclude “work of the head, and the tongue, and the foot, and the lungs, as well as of the hands” (744).

## The Eighteenth Century

**Johannes Bengel** (1687–1752) comments that Paul uses the word *commandment* in this passage. It occurs in v. 11, and in 2 Thess. 3:4, 6, 10, and 12. Though exalted Christians, the readers need to be admonished, especially about holiness. In v. 4 *vessel* clearly means body, not least when we compare 1 Sam. 21:5 and 1 Cor. 6:18. Christians are not to relapse into “a wretched passion and disease” arising from concupiscence (*Gnomon*, 800; tr. in *New Testament Word Studies*, 2.482). Ignorance is a sign of unchastity. Bengel explicitly understood “not defrauding” as *not* to do with avarice, but as following “impurity,” which is “a capital transgression.” “Taught by God” (v. 9) is no merely intellectual matter: “God imbues us with love by regeneration ... The Divine doctrine centres in love” (483). “Study” to be quiet (v. 11) literally means “be ambitious” to be quiet, which is almost an oxymoron. It redefines *ambition* in Christian lifestyle very differently from political ambition. Its opposite is (Greek) *periergazesthai*, to be busybodies. Like others, Bengel compares “work” with Paul’s injunction to work in 2 Thess. 3:6–7. Christianity never leads to sloth, and others need to be able to observe this (v. 12).

**William Law** (1686–1761) wrote much on holiness (1 Thess. 4:3–6) in his famous work, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. It is too detailed to summarize easily, but three specific extracts convey the content. (1) “If a person only tells him [a fictional example, Julius] that he may live as the generality of the world does, that he may enjoy himself as others do, ... that he may conform to the follies and the frailties of the generality, and gratify his tempers and passions as most people do, Julius never suspects that man to want a Christian spirit, or that he is doing the devil’s work. And if Julius was to read all the New Testament ... he would find his course of life condemned in every page of it” (ch. 1, 4). Law views holiness not only as negative abstinence from sexual immorality, but positively, as Paul does, in v. 7, as godliness or devotion, which

is distinctive to the Christian church, rather than the world. He reflects on the secular indolence and worldliness of much eighteenth-century society. (2) Law writes, “The best way for any one to know how much he ought to aspire after holiness, is to consider, not how much will make his present life easy, but to ask himself how much he thinks will make him easy at the hour of death” (ch. 3, 25). (3) He further writes, “When you look into the writings and lives of the first Christians, you see the same spirit that you see in the Scriptures ... Watching and prayers, self-denial and mortification, was the common business of their lives” (ch. 14, 167). In addition to his words on holiness (vv. 3–8), Law has comments on brotherly love (vv. 9–12). He observes, “Religion requires me to love all persons, as God’s creatures, that belong to him” (ch. 19, 284).

**Jonathan Edwards** (1703–58) rebukes “those who spent their time in idleness, or in doing nothing that turns to any virtuous account, either for the good of their souls or bodies, nothing either for their own benefit, or for the benefit of their neighbor ... Their hands refuse to labour, and rather than put themselves to it, they will let their families suffer, and will suffer themselves: ‘An idle soul shall suffer hunger’ (Prov. 19:15) ... In all labour there is profit” (*The Precious Importance of Time* 3.1). On Paul’s theme of holiness in vv. 3–8 Edwards writes, “Be persuaded to travel in the way that leads to heaven – in holiness, self-denial, mortification, obedience to all the laws of God, following Christ’s example ... Let all other concerns be subordinated to this ... Labour to get a sense of the vanity of this world” (*Christian Pilgrim* 4.2; 5.1). Edwards declares, “Holiness is a most beautiful and lovely thing. We drink in strange notions of holiness from our childhood, as if it were a melancholy, morose, sour, and unpleasant thing; but there is nothing in it but what is sweet and ravishingly lovely ... vastly above all other beauties” (*Holiness is a Most Beautiful and Lovely Thing*).

**Friedrich Christoph Oetinger** (1702–82) remains one of the most widely known of eighteenth-century Pietists. He wrote on conversion, repentance, holiness, faith and new birth. He comments on holiness (1 Thess. 4:3–7): “Holiness is a hidden glory and the glory of hidden holiness (Ps. 99) ... Holiness draws itself to God ... A holy person is one who knows how to offer to God and to receive from God what God brings to him ... God impressed his image on us in the spirit. If we give that image back to God again, we will have holiness, from which will flow Godliness ... God communicates his holiness and his life in Christ, and if we present not only our spirits but also our bodies in reasonable worship, we are holy (Rom. 12:1)” (*Biblical and Emblematic Dictionary*, 286). Oetinger does not equate holiness with the avoidance of sexual immorality perhaps implied in 1 Thess. 4:3–7, but defines the concept more broadly and positively, and in relation to the holiness of God.

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88) composed many hymns on holiness (v. 3). Rather than quote a whole hymn, we select one verse from each of two hymns. The first reads:

What is our calling's glorious hope  
But inward holiness?  
For this to Jesus I took up,  
I calmly wait for this.

*(Methodist Hymn Book, 557)*

A verse from a second hymn, "I know that my Redeemer lives," reads:

He wills that I should holy be;  
What can withstand his will?  
The counsel of His grace in me  
He surely shall fulfil.

*(Methodist Hymn Book, 565)*

## The Nineteenth Century

In 1817, at the height of the Romantic movement, **John Keats** (1795–1821) wrote to Benjamin Bailey of holiness as being akin to the creative imagination and the strivings of the heart: "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination – What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth ... for I have the same idea of all our passions as love: they are all in their sublime, creative of essential beauty ... The imagination may be compared with Adam's dream – he awoke, and found it truth" (Keats, *Letter to Benjamin Bailey*, 1817). Keats contrasts "reasoning" and "thoughts" with imagination. This is a long way from Paul, for it includes "sensations," and has little to do with the God of the Bible. But it is illuminating by contrast.

"The Poet's Mind" by **Alfred Tennyson** (1809–92), written in 1830 when he was 21, is closer to Paul:

Vex not thou the poet's mind  
With thy shallow wit:  
Vex not thou the poet's mind;  
For thou canst not fathom it ...  
Dark brow'd sophist come not near;  
All the place is holy ground;  
Hollow smile and frozen sneer,  
Come not here.

Holy water will I pour  
 Into every spicy flower  
 Of the laurel-shrubs that hedge it around.  
 The flowers would faint at your cruel cheer.  
 (Poems, 32–3)

Tennyson's use of the holy conveys the concept of a creative but transcendent well-spring, which surpasses the merely natural or ordinary. Paul speaks specifically of moral holiness in 1 Thess. 4:1–8.

**Friedrich Schleiermacher** (1768–1834) tried to bring these two concepts together when he observed, “The modes of action emanating from our God-consciousness are identical with those developed from the idea of good” (*The Christian Faith*, pt. 2, sect. 83.1, p. 342).

**Hermann Olshausen** (1736–1839) writes in his *Biblical Commentary* (1840) that whereas vv. 1–2 convey a *general* exhortation, vv. 3–8 narrowed this to sexual purity. The state of holiness specifically becomes chastity. But “the *body*, here, too, appears ... not as a prison of the soul, but as its holy organ ... to be made a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:15–20; *Biblical Commentary*, 406). He must keep his “vessel” receptive to the Holy Spirit. Olshausen believes that 2 Cor. 4:7, “We have this treasure in clay vessels,” is “decisive” for the meaning *body*, following Ambrosiaster and Pelagius in the Western Church, and Theodoret in the East; and then Calvin and Grotius at the Reformation. The basic difficulty is the meaning of (Greek) *ktasthai*, since we hardly speak of “acquiring” a body. Nevertheless, the meaning “to master his body” is possible. The passage cannot be addressed to married men only, especially since Paul says “each” (Greek, *hekastos*, 407). The next two verses (vv. 6–7) amplify the Christian's calling to chastity. The two verbs “to go beyond” (Greek, *hyperbainein*) and “to grasp” (*pleonektein*) “plainly unite themselves to ‘This is the will of God’” (408). “In this matter” (Greek, *en tō pragmati*) provides a difficulty for this view. *Pragma* “is not something like ‘bargain’ and ‘sale,’ as Grotius insists” (409). Olshausen understands it as *adultery*, with Chrysostom. God punishes all sins of lust. The remaining verses speak first of love (vv. 9–10), and then of industry (vv. 11–12). But the latter grows out of the former, and vv. 9–12 form a unity of thought.

**Gottlieb Lünemann** (1819–94) spends over 20 pages on these verses (*Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 103–25). Holiness (v. 3), he argues, is understood in the special sense of *lust*. He lists no fewer than 38 commentators who believe that *vessel* means *body*, and then dissents from them (108). Against all these, he argues that *ktasthai* “cannot in any way be reconciled with this interpretation. For *ktasthai* can only denote *to gain, to acquire*, but not *to own, to process*” (108–9). Our passage, he argues, has a different meaning from 2 Cor. 4:7.

He suggests that Olshausen is “arbitrary in his assertion” (109). This is a *positive* injunction “to satisfy the sexual impulses in chastity and honour” (109; emphasis original). Predictably, he claims support from Theodore, Augustine, Aquinas, Zwingli, and de Wette (110). In v. 5, therefore, Paul does not forbid “passion,” but allows it only within marriage (111). “Covetousness” refers not to greed in general, but specifically to coveting another man’s wife. The phrase in v. 6 still looks back to the principle of vv. 3–4 (112). Moral impurity “includes covetousness as well as lust” as closely related vices (114). We have not usually discussed textual criticism, but Lünemann includes an extended note, discussing in v. 8 the present-tense “God, who gives (Greek, *didonta*) his Holy Spirit” and those manuscripts which have the aorist “who gave” (*donta*). The *present* is the better reading, which Lünemann argues implies a *continuing* gift of holiness (116). Brotherly love is a “disposition” (117), “a virtue already proved” (120).

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) makes a few fresh points. He takes up Jowett’s claim that the most characteristic sins of the pagan world of Paul’s day were “chiefly two,” namely sexual immorality and inordinate desire or covetousness (*Lectures* [1884], 142–3). It is the more poignant that Paul was probably writing 1 Thessalonians from Corinth, to which he also directed these two injunctions. These commands (vv. 3–8) “were specially suited to the character and circumstances of those to whom they were addressed” (142). The implication is that our society today may need to heed different warnings of a similar nature, perhaps including greed and grasping. Hutchison is emphatic that in spite of numerous scholars arguing for the meaning of *vessel* as *wife*, it does mean *human body* (143–4). He repeats the usual arguments. The readers should constitute “an outstanding contrast” with their Gentile fellow citizens (144). Christians are to observe “boundary-lines” about immorality, about wives, and about money or property (146). Hutchison quotes the popular proverb, “The mill of God grinds late, but grinds to powder.” Love requires “a calm, steady, regular way of proceeding” (157).

The poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856), by **Elizabeth Barrett Browning** (1806–61), said to have been one of her most ambitious and popular poems, was written after her marriage to the poet Robert Browning:

Be sure, no earnest work  
Of any honest creature, howbeit weak,  
Imperfect, ill-adapted, fails so much,  
It is not gathered as a grain of sand  
To enlarge the sum of human action used  
For carrying out God’s end. No creature works  
So ill, observe, that therefore he’s cashiered.  
The honest earnest man must stand and work:

The woman also; otherwise she drops  
 At once below the dignity of man.  
 Accepting serfdom. Free men freely work:  
 Whoever fears God, fears to sit at ease.  
 (*Poems*, 3.303)

**James Denney** (1856–1917) produced two expositions on 1 Thess. 4:1–12 in The Expositor’s Bible series (1892) entitled respectively “Personal Purity” (vv. 1–8; *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 135–48) and “Charity and Independence” (vv. 9–12; 151–65). He points out that Paul’s injunctions reflect the work of a catechist teaching the new law of Christ. We must not assimilate our situation “born in a Christian country” into that of readers in the Greco-Roman pagan world (136). The Christian is “not his own any longer; even his will is not his own” (139). He comments, “Paul does not mention it [moral purity] here to dishearten the Thessalonians, but to stimulate them” (140). But “had they retained God in their knowledge, they could never have sunk to such depths of shame” (141). “Defrauding” does not here mean *dishonesty* in business, but of attending to one’s own *marriage*, not to another’s wife (142). While God is the “avenger,” this does *not only* refer to *external* action: “Whatever a man sows that shall he also reap” (143). For example, “sensual indulgence extinguishes the capacity for feeling ... This inward deadening is one of the most terrible consequences of immorality” (143–4). To disobey is to despise God, “to sin against the light” (147), and “to grieve the Holy Spirit” (148).

If immorality and covetousness were the two marks of pagan society, “personal purity and brotherly love were the notes of the Christian” (151). Denney quotes the saying in 1 John, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren” (152). To love one’s neighbor comes from the Ten Commandments; hence the readers have already been taught by God (153). But this love must be visible to the world (154). Denney alludes to the divisions within the church, and our relationship to the church overseas (156–7). Finally he turns to the subject of idleness: “They ... became a burden upon those who continued to work” (160). Not to live by work is selfishness (vv. 11–12). Denney concludes, “If we cannot be holy at our work, it is not worth taking the trouble to be holy at other times” (161). Additionally, outsiders were to take note (v. 12), for “the Church is really a spectacle to the world” (163). Idleness and fussiness are discreditable qualities: “Independence is a Christian duty” (164).

**J. B. Lightfoot** (1828–89) refers to the apostolic decree in Acts, but adds that this decree “was only issued a year or two before the present Epistle was written, and St. Paul had subsequently been distributing copies of it among the Churches of Asia Minor (Acts 16:4)” (*Notes* [1895], 53). He sets out the usual arguments

for the meaning of *vessel* as *body* or *wife* (54–5). *Ktasthai* “cannot possibly have the meaning ‘to possess or keep’” (54). The adulterer defrauds his neighbor. The Holy Spirit “is a token that He has consecrated you to himself” (58). With regard to vv. 9–12 Lightfoot insists that *philadelphias* (v. 9) “means not brotherly love, but ‘love of the brethren,’ i.e. the Christian brotherhood” (59). On v. 11, he states, “There were those who availed themselves of . . . means of support to the neglect of their lawful occupations” (60). Lightfoot concludes, “They were not to appear as vagabonds and beggars” (61; v. 12).

# 1 Thessalonians

4:13–18

## **The Living and the Dead Share Together in the Parousia and in the Resurrection**

### **Introduction and Overview**

This constitutes perhaps the most distinctive part of this epistle. The section 4:13–18 addresses those who mourn those who have died, and assures the readers that they will indeed take part in the resurrection. They will be at no disadvantage compared to those who survive until the future coming of

Christ. It also describes events of the Last Day. At least six distinct issues are raised by this passage.

(1) The first is straightforward, namely the use of the metaphor “sleep” to denote death for the Christian. As many of the fathers and Wolfhart Pannenberg argue, *sleep* is a condition which presupposes the promise of normally “waking.” The thrust of the word concerns primarily the entailment of “waking,” and only secondarily a loss of consciousness. It was the regular term for the death of Christians, and features constantly in patristic and other literature. It is a matter of debate whether the NRSV translation of the Greek as “those who have died” (v. 13) gains in intelligibility for the modern reader more than it loses. Most of the church fathers capitalize on Paul’s language.

(2) The motivation of this passage is to comfort those who were bereaved by losing loved ones *before* the Parousia. We cannot speculate whether, as Albert Schweitzer argued, the earliest Christians actually expected still to be alive when the Parousia occurred, as “the last generation of the elect” (*Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 58–66, 123–38). Paul and they must all have witnessed deaths of Christians. However, some believed that those who died before the Parousia somehow missed out on what the final survivors would experience. This is implied by Paul’s response. *All* who have died in Christ, he urges, will participate *together* in the Parousia, the resurrection, and glory. Many in the Christian tradition used this passage to console the bereaved. Jerome’s *Letter to Paula* and to Heliodorus provides an outstanding model of such consolatory pastoral letters.

(3) Many raise questions about Paul’s consistency. This applies, first, to whether 1 Thessalonians coheres with 1 Corinthians 15. Most of the church fathers readily quote these two sources together, without noting any tension between them. Second, Phil. 1:23 Paul implies that “to depart and to be with Christ” follows immediately upon death. But in 1 Thessalonians 4 and in 1 Corinthians 15 he asserts that several eschatological events will occur between death and the consummation of all things. Can both be true?

An analogy will suggest how these two perspectives fit together and are true. Our suggestion owes much to the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (“Achilles and the Tortoise,” *Dilemmas*, 36–53). Ryle addresses half a dozen supposed paradoxes or contradictions, and sheds new light on them. Philippians represents a *participant* perspective; 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians present an *observer* perspective. For example, on Christmas eve, we may say to overexcited children, “The sooner you go to sleep, the sooner Christmas morning will come.” From the *participant* or “experience” perspective this is true. The next thing that the children *experience* is waking to Christmas. On the other hand, meanwhile, parents and other adults fill the children’s stockings; prepare the remaining

food or decorations, and so on. They represent the *observer's* viewpoint, or in philosophical terms, the ontological or “objective” viewpoint. *Both* the existential, or *participant*, stance of Philippians and the *observer* stance of 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians are true, if seen from different angles. The next thing of which the Christian dead are aware is being immediately in the presence of Christ. Yet this in no way contradicts the unfolding of God's eschatological drama, in the eyes of an observer-audience. 1 Thessalonians does not raise insuperable objections to Paul's consistency.

(4) Many church fathers, including John Chrysostom, appeal to authoritative language for the last things. This emerges in Chrysostom in three ways. First, Paul uses the imagery of command: the voice of the Archangel; the sound of the trumpet, a cry of *command* (4:16). Second, the God who makes resurrection possible is the Creator God, who brought everything into existence from nothing. This is more than reconstruction; it is *creative* transformation. Third, Chrysostom compares “the word of the Lord” (v. 15) with “Thus saith the Lord” in the prophets, and with the command of a king which *does* something in the very saying of it. It *brings things about*. All this amounts to an anticipation of what J. L. Austin, John Searle, and others today call a *performative* or *illocutionary utterance*. What God utters or pronounces at the end time *sets the end events in motion*. This provides an active, dynamic dimension to what Paul describes. It transcends bare description. Donald D. Evans expounds this in *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (see also Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*; Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 1–30; and Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics*, 53–150).

(5) One of the most controversial questions in the whole epistle comes in vv. 15–16: “We who are alive, who are left until the Coming of the Lord . . .” Does Paul assume that he and his readers will still be alive when the Parousia occurs? Will it happen within their lifetime? Chrysostom, again, was among the first to engage explicitly with this problem, understanding “we” to signify *not* Paul himself, but “the faithful” who remain *alive at that time*, which may be “ten thousand years” away. We have to ask what would be the effect if Paul had said, “Those who are alive and remain.” It would suggest that he did not take seriously the *possibility* of an imminent Parousia.

The philosopher P. F. Strawson is among those who distinguish the logic of *presupposition* from that of assertion. The second has a clear truth-value; the former, at best, a *conditional* truth-value, if not no truth-value at all (Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, 190–2, 199–204; see also Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory*, 175–9). “We” shows *solidarity* with all Christians who are open to expect the Parousia at any moment, we suggest, *not necessarily* those who firmly expect to be alive at the Parousia.

This may seem to fly in the face of much New Testament exegesis. But many who have given most thought to the subject appreciate its subtlety. Such a one

is Arthur L. Moore, who has both written a modern commentary, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, and a significant scholarly book, *The Parousia in the New Testament*. In his commentary he expresses doubt about whether the main problem that faced Paul was “the supposedly unexpected death of Christians prior to the Parousia” (*Thessalonians*, 67). Was it not, rather, “the status of dead Christians over against living ones at the Parousia”? (67). He concludes, “That Paul himself even believed that he would certainly live to see the Parousia is an open question” (67). The certainty of Paul’s supposed belief in a Parousia before his death “arise[s] more through its frequent assertion than its sound evidence” (70). Paul took seriously the possibility that he might be killed. In 1 Thess. 5:10, he declares, “Whether we are awake or asleep.” “We” in 4:15 does not mean “You and I” but “those who are left” (as Chrysostom also insists: *Thessalonians*, 70). This reflects many in earlier tradition.

Moore insists again that the cause of grief in 1 Thess. 4:13–18 was “not disappointment over the non-arrival of the Parousia” (*The Parousia*, 108; emphasis original). It was about the possibility of the dead missing “the first festive phase of the Parousia” (108–9). Paul responds that neither group has any advantage over the other. As far as the pronoun “we” (Greek, *hēmeis*, v. 15) is concerned, Moore observes, “There is considerable support for the suggestion that Paul is speaking not of a particular group . . . but of the Christian Church in general” (109–10). The contrast between two categories is more important than “who comprises each group” (110). Moreover in 5:1–11 he explicitly states that the time of the Parousia is not known, but will be a surprise. 2 Cor. 5:9 and Phil. 1:20 still reckon with a dual possibility. They do not convey a changed view.

Moore is not alone among New Testament specialists in holding this view. Joost Holleman, for example, considers the view that Paul or the Thessalonians “did not expect anyone to die in the meantime” (i.e., before the Parousia), and calls it a view that is “rebutted with arguments leading to a different thesis” (*Resurrection and Parousia*, 24). Beda Rigaux insists Paul rejects any chronological or mathematical calculation which allows him to assert when the Parousia will occur (*Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, 540–1). Ben Witherington makes the same point. He writes that some regard v. 17 as “proof positive that Paul believed that he would live to see the Parousia of Jesus. But this overlooks at least two key factors: first, Paul did not know in advance when he would die, and, second, he argues that the Advent will happen at an unexpected time, like a thief in the night” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 133–4).

Admittedly many argue for an opposite viewpoint. Hermann Olshausen dismisses what he calls a tortuous argument in church interests. Even F. F. Bruce argues, “The writers rank themselves with those who will live to see the Parousia, referring to them in the first person plural,” though he adds that “us” means “us Christians generally” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 99). The issues are complex, and both

views deserve respect. But in our view, Moore, Rigaux, and Witherington are the more convincing. This is confirmed by Strawson's arguments about presupposition and assertion, and Paul's expression of pastoral solidarity with his readers.

(6) Rudolf Bultmann is scathing about the mythological currency of "meet the Lord in the air" and "caught up in the clouds" (v. 17). He declares, "The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself ... Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically ... but existentially" ("New Testament and Mythology," 10; also *New Testament Mythology*, 9). Hence most of the language of our passage, viewed as "myth" cannot, Bultmann argues, be taken at face value as a *description* of cosmic events. He writes, "We no longer believe in the three-storied universe which the creeds take for granted ... We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven, or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air (1 Thess. 4:15–17)" ("New Testament and Mythology," 4; *New Testament Mythology*, 4).

Christian tradition remains untroubled by "objective" language, if it is interpreted as symbol. But Bultmann insists that we should interpret it existentially, as a *human* mode of existence. Hence for many it poses one of the extreme tensions or "provocations," to which Jauss refers. To assume that Bultmann is entirely right about his whole program of demythologizing may be premature. Much in the New Testament does indeed carry an existential or practical thrust; it does not simply describe or report. But many have argued convincingly against Bultmann's view of myth. They have queried whether his examples ring true concerning what still remains after the demythologising process (in eschatological language, Christological language, the work of Christ, and the Holy Spirit), in Bultmann's program. It is as if we were forced to express and either/or about so-called myth and description.

This belongs to the scope of a book, rather than of a short comment (see my collected criticisms in *The Two Horizons*, 205–92, and *Hermeneutics*, 166–84). Many regard Bultmann's dismissal of the language of divine intervention in history as a denial of *theism* ("Myth in Biblical and Christian Tradition," in *Basic Questions in Theology*, 1–79; "Eschatology and the Experience of Meaning," in *Basic Questions*, 192–210). Pannenberg writes, "The acceptance of divine intervention in the course of events ... is fundamental to every religious understanding of the world" (*Basic Questions*, 3.14). He argues, "In primitive Christianity eschatology does not display mythical features" (68). John Macquarrie asks, "Does it make sense to talk of dying and rising with Christ without an assurance that Christ actually died and rose?" (Macquarrie, "Philosophy and Theology in Bultmann's Thought," 141).

Had he explored the logic of *self-involvement* in the Anglo-American tradition, and "participation" and "world" in Hans Georg Gadamer, Bultmann

might have been able to make positive points, without unduly negative ones. We cannot accept Bultmann's recasting of 1 Thess. 4:15–17 as it stands, even if we interpret eschatological imagery with caution. Brevard Childs and George Caird prefer to speak of "broken myth" and of metaphor in such contexts (Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, 42; Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 219–71). Their work is convincing.

(7) A seventh issue concerns popular interpretations of 1 Thess. 4:16–17 as a "rapture" of believers. We have produced a special note on this at the end of this chapter, defining the three key terms *rapture*, *dispensationalist*, and *premillennial*, and considering the work of J. N. Darby, Hal Lindsey, and others.

## The Patristic Era

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) refers to being "taken up in the clouds" (v. 17; *Stromata* 6.13; ANF 2.505). He is speaking of degrees of glory in heaven in accordance with the covenant of salvation. Jew and Gentile, he says, meet in the one unity of faith, and as God's chosen ones, through Christ "are honoured with the most august glory." "Grades" of office in the church imitate angelic glory, and glory is given after being taken up to meet Christ in the clouds. The ante-Nicene fathers alone include at least 34 references to vv. 13–17.

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) has perhaps the most substantial quotations from 1 Thess. 4:13–17 among the fathers before Augustine. First, he argues that the dissolution of our "tabernacle" of the flesh is not inconsistent with the resurrection of our bodies. He quotes 2 Cor. 5:1, "If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a house not made with [human] hands, eternal in the heavens." The bestowal of this "house" is "accomplished by a sudden change." He declares, "As he [Paul] writes to the Thessalonians, 'For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent those who are asleep. The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel ...'" (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 41; ANF 3.575). He also addresses the problem of the putrefaction of the body before death, and whether the body can recover its perfection at the resurrection. Must we admit "the salvation of *only* the soul?" If we are to be raised to glory, will this include the body? By way of reply Tertullian appeals first to 1 Cor. 15:52, and then to 1 Thess. 4:13–17. The dead will be raised incorruptible. God will bring back the dead with Christ. We shall meet the Lord and be with him for ever. What looks humanly impossible is possible with God (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 57; ANF 3.590).

More citations occur in Tertullian's work on the resurrection. Rather than discuss the coherence or consistency of Paul's doctrine, however (as he did in

ch. 45), he quotes 1 Thess. 4:13–17 in full, because he is asserting that the last resurrection will take place at the final judgment. The chapter virtually repeats the broad argument of 1 Thessalonians. The readers turned from idols to serve the living and true God, “and to wait for his Son from heaven; whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus” (1 Thess. 1:9–10). Paul speaks of the coming of Christ “with the whole company of his saints” (3:13). Then in 1 Thess. 4:13–17: the Thessalonians “must not sorrow concerning them that are asleep.” Paul declares, “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even those that sleep shall God bring with him ... we shall not prevent those which are asleep.” He then offers a reflection on “the trumpet of God” and the archangel’s voice (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 24; ANF 3.562).

In debate with Marcion, Tertullian quotes, “We who remain until the Coming of Christ,” “the dead in Christ shall rise first,” and “caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (vv. 15–17; *Against Marcion* 5.15; ANF 3.462). The context in Tertullian’s fifteenth chapter is his defense of 1 Thessalonians as one of the valuable “shorter epistles” of Paul. The first part of 1 Thessalonians 4 provides an important call to holiness and to sexual purity, while the second part explains that Christians who have died before the final coming of Christ will suffer no disadvantage, because all will be raised together, to meet the Lord together. To reject this would be to despise God. A second reference occurs: “We shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord [in the air]” (*Against Marcion* 5.20; ANF 3.473). He is repeating Paul’s argument in Philippians, which includes, “He shall change the body of our humiliation ... into His glorious body” (Phil. 3:21). A third occurrence describes the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds in Dan. 7:13, and concludes, “So shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17; *Against Marcion* 3.23; ANF 3.343).

Tertullian also discusses 1 Thess. 4:13 in *On Patience*. He devotes a chapter to patience under bereavement. Paul declared, “Be not overwhelmed with sadness at the falling asleep of any one, like the Gentiles who are without hope” (4:13; Tertullian, *On Patience* 9; ANF 3.713). Grief should not continue overlong as to bear “the temporary withdrawal of him who you believe will return ... longing must also be tempered with patience” (*On Patience* 9; ANF 3.713). Tertullian again quotes the phrases “the archangel’s trumpet”; “the command of God” (1 Thess. 4:16; see also 1 Cor. 15:52); “caught up in the air to meet him at his coming”; and “the dead shall be first to arise” (1 Thess. 4:17) in his *On the Soul*. In ch. 54, he discusses the destination of the soul at death. After criticizing Plato and the philosophers on Hades, he returns to 1 Thess. 4:16–17 (*On the Soul* 54–5; ANF 3.231). The same phrase appears in Tertullian’s work *On Prayer*. He writes, “We await in prayer the angel’s trumpet” (1 Thess. 4:16 and 1 Cor. 15:52; *On Prayer* 29; ANF 3.691). A prayer of righteousness averts God’s anger,

strengthens the weak, opens prison-bars, and delivers from death. It is “the wall of faith,” and “the angels, likewise, all pray” (*On Prayer* 29; ANF 3.691).

Tertullian once more refers to our passage when he attacks elaborate dressing of the hair, and even the addition of false hair. Will you rise at the resurrection, he asks, “with ceruse and rouge and saffron?” Nothing can rise except “flesh and spirit, sole and pure.” It will not be elaborately adorned “when the angels will carry it up to meet Christ in the air” (1 Thess. 4:13–17; *On the Apparel of Women* 2.7; ANF 4.22). Thus we note 10 quotations from 1 Thess. 4:13–17 in Tertullian. Two or three occur in the course of teaching on the resurrection of the body. Some urge present ethical conduct on the basis of the future. All witness to the importance of the last things. Tertullian has “received” our passage in 10 or more different ways.

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) quotes virtually all of our passage in full when he describes the resurrection transformation. He begins, “I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep ...” He quotes virtually all four verses (1 Thess. 4:13–16; *Against Celsus* 2.65; ANF 4.458). This chapter expounds the resurrection following 1 Cor. 15: 1–5, 8, alluding to Christ’s appearing to 500 brethren at once, and then to James (1 Cor. 15:6–7), following the witness of Paul earlier, in 63 and 65. The principle of transformation is anticipated in the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–8). Christ is to be Lord of the dead and the living (Rom. 14:9). “For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible” (1 Cor. 15:52). But “the dead will be raised first” (1 Thess. 4:16). Origen quotes 1 Thess. 4:13–15 in full. He then refers to his fuller commentary, which is no longer extant.

Later, in book 5 of *Against Celsus*, Origen quotes 1 Thess. 4:15–17: “This we say by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive and remain unto the Coming of the Lord ... The Lord shall descend from heaven with a shout ... the trumpet of God ... The dead in Christ shall rise first ... to meet the Lord in the air” (vv.15–17; *Against Celsus* 5.17; ANF 4.550). Origen is replying to the accusation of Celsus that Christians believe in the literal, unchanged, resurrection of the same earthly body. It is transformed, he asserts, into a higher condition. His reply combines an explanatory exegesis of 1 Cor. 15:35–52 with 1 Thess. 4:13–17.

Not all of Origen’s theology of the resurrection is drawn from 1 Thess. 4:13–17. He sometimes implies that the soul “possesses its own substance and life,” which is nearer to Plato than to Paul. The body will “rise in incorruption” (1 Cor. 15:42; *On First Principles*, preface, 5; ANF 4.240). He discusses the resurrection body in *Against Celsus* 5.18–23; ANF 4.550–3). But he was criticized for discussing it in an overspiritualized way, as if it were not a “body” at all. Jerome made such a criticism. But further work of Origen has been suppressed or lost. Whereas Origen finds the link between the earthly body and the resurrection body in the “soul,” Paul finds it in God, who gives it a

body fit for its purpose. Commenting on “we shall be changed,” however, Origen declares that the resurrection body “will shine forth in splendour ... and corruption shaken off” (*On First Principles* 2.4.7; ANF 4.275).

Furthermore Origen gives a more systematic study of the nature of the last resurrection and final judgment in *On First Principles* 2.10.1–8; ANF 4.293–6). He defends the creed of the church, and insists that “there will be a resurrection” (*On First Principles* 2.10.1). He stresses continuity of identity: these bodies will be “our own.” Moreover these bodies will have “some shape” (2.10.2). He quotes 1 Cor. 15:39–42. But “we shall all be changed” (2.10.3), and “God gives it a body as it pleases him” (1 Cor. 15:38). Yet God’s vengeance comes in the judgment, even though, for Origen, this is “for the purgation of souls” (2.10.6; ANF 4.296). Origen, therefore, wanders from 1 Thess. 4:13–17, but retains the basic emphasis on resurrection. Joseph W. Trigg concludes, “Origen insisted that his teaching on the resurrection of the body upheld the church’s teaching against heretics who denied the resurrection altogether, and against simple Christians whose grossly materialistic interpretation exposed the church to ridicule by propagating ideas unworthy of God” (*Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church*, 114).

**Cyprian** (d. 258) quotes vv.13–14: “We would not that you should be ignorant ... those who have fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him” (*Treatise* 12.3.58; ANF 5.548). This reflects Paul’s argument, for he asserts that no one should be made sad by death, because of the certainty of the resurrection. Enoch was translated; Ezekiel speaks of the raising of the dry bones. He quotes vv.13–14, followed by 1 Cor. 15:36, 41–4, 53–5.

**Methodius** (c. 260–c. 312) reflects on the meaning of “oil in the lamps.” This is “the oil of good works” and of prudence. “Behold the Bridegroom comes” is akin to “the trumpet, when the saints, their bodies being raised, shall be caught up, and shall go on the clouds to meet the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16–17; *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 6.4; ANF 6.330). The context is his praise of virginity. **Lactantius** (c. 250–c. 325) alludes to 1 Thess. 4:14 in the course of discussing the relation between the body and the soul. In the future, he declares, we shall dwell in perpetual light, provided that the soul masters the body. He alludes to 4:16 (*The Divine Institutes* 2.13; ANF 7.61).

**Basil the Great** (330–379) makes a pastoral appeal, like our text, “not to sorrow ‘even as others who have no hope’ (v. 13) ... I do not mean that we should be insensible to the loss we have suffered, but we should not succumb to our sorrow” (Basil, Letter 62; NPNF2 8.162). Basil repeats his pastoral injunction, saying, “Do not lose that tranquillity now; do not, by extravagant lamentation, and by entirely giving yourself up to grief, put the opportunity for action into the hands of those who are plotting your bane. If lament you must (which I do not allow, lest you be in this respect like ‘them who have no hope’) ... raise ... a chant of tears” (1 Thess. 4:13; Basil, Letter 28; NPNF2 8.132).

**Cyril of Jerusalem** (315–387) includes a full quotation of 1 Thess. 4:15–17. He urges, “Let us wait and look for the Lord’s coming upon the clouds of heaven. Then shall angels’ trumpets sound; ‘The dead in Christ shall rise first . . . For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel . . . Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up with them . . . so shall we be ever with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16–17; Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 15.20; NPNF2 7.110). As befits a catechism, Cyril takes his readers through basic Christian teaching, and Lecture 15 concerns the Parousia, the judgment, and the resurrection. Cyril quotes 1 Thess. 4:13 again in his *Catechetical Lectures* 18.17 (NPNF2 7.139), following Paul’s view that this constitutes basic Christian teaching.

**Gregory Nazianzus** (329–389/90) and **Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 330–395) are roughly contemporary with Basil and with Cyril. Gregory Nazianzus quotes, “the voice of the Archangel, the last trumpet” (1 Thess. 4:16; *Panegyric on His Brother Caesarius* 7.21; NPNF2 7.237). Gregory of Nyssa declares, “We believe, according to the words of the Apostle, that we also “shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:16; *Against Eunomius* 12.1; NPNF2 5.242). The whole chapter is concerned with the resurrection. That the Cappadocian fathers had a concern for the last resurrection is clear. Gregory of Nyssa refers to 1 Thess. 4:16 a second time in *On the Making of Man* 25.11 (NPNF2 5.417), discussing the resurrection. In ch. 26 Gregory argues that the resurrection is not beyond possibility, citing Phil. 1:23 and 1 Cor. 15:12.

**Ambrose of Milan** (c. 338–397) cites 1 Thess. 4:14, 16, and 17. He quotes our text, “We would not that you should be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you be not sorrowful as the rest, who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:14; *On the Decease of Satyrus* 1.9; NPNF2 10.162), and exclaims in 1:4, “Why should I weep too violently for my brother, knowing as I do that Divine love could not die?” “Why should I weep more than others?” (1:5). In his treatise *On Belief in the Resurrection* in book 2, Ambrose adds the quotation of v. 17 to that of v. 14, as well as 1 Cor. 15:23, 28, and 52. He declares, “We who are alive shall not prevent those who are asleep” (v. 14), and “The dead shall rise first . . . We shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet Christ in the air” (v. 17; *On Belief in the Resurrection* 2.93; NPNF2 10.189). He cites 1 Thess. 4:17 yet again in *On Belief in the Resurrection* 2.76; NPNF2 10.186. He is expounding a thorough understanding of the resurrection, speaking of death (2:33–50); reason and experience (51–3); resurrection as a principle (54–65); and other parts of scripture (2:66–80; NPNF2 10.166–87).

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) comments on 4:13–14:

The reason [for Paul’s words] is clear, because if resurrection is believed to be the future of those who have died, they are not to grieve, those who depart with the sign of the cross. Unbelievers, however, are in truth to mourn, those who pass

to gehenna, that they may thoroughly learn to believe what they had rejected; the faithful, however, will rise to glory in order that those who dwell in this age of stupidity, on account of their faith, will be seen to rise; for they look ahead to their glory. These are those who through Jesus depart under the hope of this faith, to be led in with him at his coming that they may be seen by humanity. (*Commentarius*, 3.226)

On vv. 15–18 Ambrosiaster points out that the meaning of this section has been spoken by the Lord concerning the hope of the resurrection and his promise of glory, and how the future might be. Paul explains that the readers should not sorrow because believers “who have died in Christ will rise at the advent of the Lord” (*Commentarius*, 3.227). “For the Lord Christ himself by the will of the Father, as if he were the Archangel, will descend with heavenly power, even as in the Apocalypse of the Apostle John, to make war in the name of God against the Antichrist” (227). He will descend with the trump of God, appearing in fire, as God appeared to Moses; for he is the true Son of God. Whence “we who are alive will be caught up (*rapiemus*) together (*una*), with those who are borne on the clouds to meet with Christ in the air” (227). All will come with the Lord to battle. Believers are to be consoled with these words (228). Ambrosiaster thus pays careful attention to each verse, as well as conveying the general sense of the passage, but also enhances its apocalyptic dimension in a cosmic battle with the Antichrist.

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) begins his *Homily* on v. 13: “There are many things which from ignorance alone cause us sorrow, so that if we come to understand them well, we banish our grief” (Chrysostom, *Homily* 7; NPNF1 13.352). The readers’ ignorance specifically concerns the resurrection. Chrysostom notes that this was not “disbelief” in the resurrection as such. The readers had only a partial belief in its place in a sequence of events, and its timing. He also discusses v. 14. The death of Jesus does not remain an incidental allusion, or mere stage-setting for the resurrection, but assumes Christ’s real enfleshment: “If He did not assume Flesh, neither did he die. If He did not die, neither did He rise again” (*Homily* 7, 352). The readers, Chrysostom asserts, must not mourn, as those who have no hope. Christ is the first-fruits from the dead. On vv. 15–17 Chrysostom insists that all be raised, but “not all shall be in glory, only those in Christ” (*Homily* 7; NPNF1 13.353). Paul also comforts the bereaved with the future “abundant honour, and with its speedy arrival.” The dead will be brought “from many places” (*Homily* 7; 353). This implies a translocal idea of the church. Moreover this is the word of the Lord, not just that of Paul. “We who are [still] alive . . . shall in no way precede those who have fallen asleep.” This accords, he argues, with 1 Cor. 15:52, “We shall all be changed, in the twinkling of an eye.”

On the still controversial question of whether Paul expected the Parousia during his lifetime, Chrysostom says, “*In saying ‘we,’ he does not speak of himself, for he was not about to remain until the [future] Resurrection, but he speaks of the faithful*” (*Homily 7*, my emphasis; NPNF1 13.353). Hence he adds also, “We that are left unto the coming of the Lord” shall not precede “them.” Chrysostom calls the first category “them,” and this becomes explicit in 1 Thess. 5:1–11. “*They who are alive at the Parousia shall not anticipate those who are dissolved, who are rotted, who have been dead ten thousand years*” (*Homily 7*; NPNF1 13.353).

Chrysostom also sees Paul’s logic that the God of the resurrection is the God who creates out of nothing. He asks, “Which is the more easy, to bring one into being out of nothing, or to raise up again him that was dissolved?” Some have drowned; others have died in different ways, perhaps also devoured by animals. Should this perplex us? Some are “consumed by fire.” But “all life springs from corruption,” as Paul’s analogy of the seed implies (1 Cor. 15:36). He asks further: “Dost thou not see every day a resurrection and death taking place in the periods of our life? Whither is our youth gone?” (*Homily 7*; NPNF1 13.354). Chrysostom could not have known about the human body’s seven-year cycle of change, but he would doubtless have cited it if he had. He cites above all the Creator God’s capacity to create anew. He correctly adds, “We may take refuge in the power and skilfulness of God” (*Homily 7*; 354).

Chrysostom turns to vv. 15–18 in his *Homily 8*. He declares that Paul’s appeal to “the word of the Lord” recalls Isaiah’s “Thus saith the Lord,” and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:1). He then quotes 1 Thess. 4:15–16a. The voice of the Archangel corresponds to “The Bridegroom comes” in the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matt. 25:6). Angels will minister at the resurrection, although it is God’s word, not the angels themselves, that has the power to raise from the dead. It is “as if a king’s commanding and saying it, those . . . should go forth” (*Homily 8*; NPNF1 13.355). This is virtually to cite what we should nowadays call “a performative utterance” (as pioneered by J. L. Austin; see introductory section, above).

The homily continues, “The dead in Christ shall rise first; then we who are alive and are left . . .” (1 Thess. 4:16–17; *Homily 8*; NPNF1 13.356). We are carried, Chrysostom suggests, on the chariot of our Father. Hence we are to comfort one another with these words (v. 18). It is like the coming of an affectionate father. Believers are “gathered together.” Among unbelievers, “how great will be the fear and trembling.” But might one say, “God is full of love,” hence this is only a threat? Chrysostom replies, “These things will happen” (*Homily 8*; NPNF1 13.357). He compares the skepticism of those to whom Noah preached, and considers the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Indeed his examples of the seriousness of judgment fill some three further pages. He concludes, “I say not these things to frighten you” (*Homily 8*; 359) but as salutary medicine. Here is another example of Jauss’s “provocation.”

**Jerome** (c. 345–420) appears to quote 1 Thess. 4:13 some five times, and vv. 15–17 at least three times in extant writings (*Letter 3 to Rufinus* 3.4; NPNF2 6.124). The Letter to Heliodorus is to console his old friend on the loss of his nephew, who has died of a fever, and is a fine pastoral letter showing deep feeling, but also confidence in the resurrection. Likewise Jerome writes to Paula to offer his sympathy on the death of Blaesilla three months after her Christian conversion. Blaesilla, he says, is now in paradise. He writes, “I wish to check a mother’s weeping, and I groan myself ... Even Jesus wept for Lazarus.” Yet the command of the apostle is that “we sorrow not for those who sleep, even as the Gentiles, who have no hope.” Similarly in Letter 75, to Theodora, Jerome writes to console her on the death of her husband, Lucinius, in 399. For “the blessed Apostle forbids us to sorrow concerning those who are asleep” (1 Thess. 4:13; Letter 75.1; NPNF2 6.155; see also Jerome, *Against Vigilantias* 6; NPNF2 6.619).

**Rufinus** (c. 345–414) was a friend of Jerome and translator of Origen. He has several references to our passage. He includes one of the longest quotations from 1 Thess. 4:13–17, beginning “I do not want you to be uninformed ...” (v. 13), and concluding, “So we will be with the Lord for ever” (v. 17). He quotes all four verses (*A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed* 43; NPNF2 3.561). He returns to v. 17 in section 45 (NPNF2 3.562). He is discussing “the Resurrection of the Flesh” and the glory of the resurrection, citing also 1 Cor. 15:13–14 and 53, without finding a contradiction with Thessalonians. This is not even, he argues, a novel doctrine peculiar to Paul, and cites Job, Ezekiel, and Matthew.

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) stresses that believers should confront death with a very different attitude from those “who expect nothing further after death” (*Commentarii*, 2.27). On the contrary, we build our hope on the resurrection of Jesus, who will return, and on the consequent resurrection of the dead. Hence we use the word “sleep” (*dormientes*, 28). Since God has raised Christ from the dead, “nothing can resist the resurrection, because God has willed this” (28). Hence the act of being taken up (*assumptioni*) follows. This word is not simply Paul’s but is from the Lord. When Paul speaks of those who are alive at the (second) advent of the Lord, he uses “we.” But this does not refer to those who have life in the present. Theodore explicitly writes:

He [Paul] said “we,” *not about himself*, nor about those who are held in this present life *at that time*, but about those believers who are alive when the future resurrection takes place. He said “we/us” (*nos*) to denote “believers” because he himself was of such a kind and was writing to those who were such a kind. This is why he adds, “We who are left at the Advent of the Lord,” showing why he spoke not of those who were living at his own time, but about those who are living at the consummation. (*Commentarii*, 2.29, my emphasis)

Those who sleep will not come before those believers who are caught up in the air (v. 15). As with Chrysostom, this provides another “provocation” to a widespread view. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with the sound of a trumpet, when the dead who are in Christ will be raised first “as he writes to the Corinthians, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (30). He names the “trumpet” to denote the command, “Arise,” which nowadays we should call a performative. The dead are found “above” the clouds.

**Augustine of Hippo** (354–430) quotes the whole of 1 Thess. 4:13–16 in *City of God* 20.20 (NPNF1 2.439). Paul’s words “most distinctly proclaim the future resurrection of the dead, when the Lord Jesus shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” We cannot say concerning those who are alive at the Parousia that “It is impossible that they should both die and revive again while they are carried aloft through the air.” The words, “And so shall we be ever with the Lord” do not imply an existence for ever in the air, but only believers’ passing through the air to meet with Christ. “We shall be with Him possessed of immortal bodies.” Augustine compares 1 Cor. 15:36, “That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die.” Hence he concludes that even those who are living at the Parousia will pass through a *rapid* process of death and resurrection. This is one of his most distinctive speculations, taken up by Bede in the Middle Ages (*City of God* 20.20; NPNF1 2.439).

Augustine quotes 1 Thess. 4:17 again, “Then we, living, who remain, together with them, shall be caught up in the clouds ...” (*On the Good of Marriage* 2; NPNF1 3.399). He is alluding to the command, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28), and further refers to God’s undoing the intrusion of sin and death. Another allusion occurs in Augustine’s sermon on the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1–13). When the maidens are called to “Go to meet the Bridegroom,” he notes that “all slept,” and comments, “There is another sleep which no one escapes,” and then quotes 1 Thess. 4:13 (*Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 43.6; NPNF1 6.403).

In his thoughts on Ps. 143, Augustine considers those who conspire against God and his people. Against them, the people cry, “Flash forth Thy lightning ... Send forth Thine arrows,” to which he compares, “For the Lord Himself shall come with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trump of God shall He descend from heaven” (1 Thess. 4:16; *On the Psalms* 143.16; NPNF1 8.655). This shows how naturally Augustine can use this passage, as an example of the authority of God and for Christology. His reflections on Ps. 119 more explicitly concern death and life-giving. He declares, “For we shall not be without our bodies when we ‘shall be for evermore with the Lord’” (1 Thess. 4:17). On Ps. 3 Augustine considers the word “sleep.” He mentions the “numberless instances of sleep being put for death; as the Apostle says, ‘I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep’” (1 Thess. 4:13; *On the Psalms* 3.5; NPNF1 8.5).

**John Cassian** (c. 360–after 430) wrote his *Institutes* as rules for the monastic life, and *Conferences* as conversations with leaders of Eastern monasticism. He discusses spiritual discernment, with reference to the four “senses” of scripture: literal, moral, tropological, and anagogical meaning, even in advance of Gregory. On the anagogical or eschatological sense he quotes 1 Thess. 4:13–15, “We would not have you ignorant ... the dead in Christ shall rise first” (*The First Conference of Abbot Nesteras* 8; NPNF2 11.438).

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) writes that Paul does not completely oppose grieving, “but rules out an immoderate degree, and consoles them with hope in the resurrection” (*Commentary* 2.116). Paul offers a proof of the resurrection from the resurrection of Christ (v. 14). “We who are alive” *does not refer to “his [Paul’s] own person, but to people alive at the time”* (117, my emphasis). The Lord in person will descend, and appear from heaven. The archangel’s cry and the trumpet will give “a loud and unimaginable sound.” He compares 1 Cor. 15:51–2, “The dead will rise incorruptible,” but he also compares the terror of Moses’ trumpet. Like Augustine, he alludes to the parable of the virgins (118). Like him, he also compares those commended for their faith in Hebrews. In v. 17, he declares, the Christian dead “ride on the clouds” and will meet the Judge of all. He also cites Luke 17:34–6, “One will be taken; one left” (*Commentary* 2.118).

## The Medieval Period

**Oecumenius of Tricca** (6th century) is indebted to Cyril of Alexandria, and upheld Chalcedon’s Christology. He often seeks the “spiritual meaning” of the biblical text, and uses allegorical methods. When he considers the vision in Revelation, “The dwelling of God is with human beings,” or “I am making all things new,” he appeals also to Paul in 1 Thess. 4:17: “Then we who are left shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air ...” (*Commentary on the Apocalypse* 184; FC 112). He also cited 1 Thess. 4:16 in connection with the “seven trumpets” of Revelation (84), and v. 17 in connection with “carried off” (79). He includes four quotations from our passage.

**Bede the Venerable** (c. 673–735) repeats the extract from Augustine in *The City of God* 20.20. As we have seen, Augustine insists that we must not exclude the possibility that “those who are living” at the Parousia “will never die at all,” even when they are being carried through the clouds. Resurrection cannot take place without prior death. But finally, the dead in Christ “being possessed of everlasting bodies ... will be with him [Christ] wherever he is” (*Excerpts from the Words of St. Augustine*, 286).

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) notes Paul’s link between the future resurrection and the resurrection of Jesus Christ (*Opera Omnia*, in PL 112.6, 550–1). Most of his material comes from Theodore and other church fathers, almost phrase for phrase. This applies to “we who are alive and remain.” Rabanus repeats, “When he said ‘we/us’ (*nos*), he spoke not about himself, nor about those who are held in this present life at that time, but about those believers who are alive when the future resurrection takes place. He said ‘we/us’ (*nos*) to denote believers” (555; from Theodore). Paul and the readers share life in Christ; hence Paul can identify with *all* Christians as “we” or “us.” Christ will descend from heaven with the sound of the trumpet, and believers will be caught up in the clouds. Christ will transform the living and dead in a moment (556). Rabanus repeats his language about the cry of command (558), and the saying from the Gospels (Luke 17:34–6), as Theodoret does, “One will be taken; one left,” and amplifies it: “On that night there will be two in one bed: one will be taken, the other left; and two women grinding at the mill: one will be taken, the other left” (558).

**The Phoenix** in *The Exeter Book* (ninth century) is a poem in Old English, which represents the death and resurrection of Christ allegorically. Its author is unknown, although the first part may date back to Lactantius. After his death and resurrection Christ returns, raises dead believers, and takes living followers on a flight through the air to beautiful Paradise. The **St. Erkenwald Poem** is an anonymous Middle English poem loosely based on the life of Erkenwald, bishop of London in the seventh century. In the poem resurrection is achieved through baptism, and the link with biblical accounts lies in the miraculous nature of the resurrection event.

**Lanfranc of Canterbury** (c. 1010–89) stresses that the Lord himself gives an authoritative command, speaking with the voice of a trumpet, and says “Arise” (*In D. Pauli Epistolas Commentarii*, PL 150.337). He then quotes Augustine, *City of God* 20.20, as Bede does, to the effect that the dead will be caught up in the same “abduction” (*in eodem rapta*), and will afterwards inherit the same immortality, “We shall all rise, all who sleep” (337).

**Anselm of Laon** (d. 1117) was chancellor and dean of Laon Cathedral, and lectured on the Bible, theology, and the liberal arts. He produced substantial material on 1 Corinthians 15. When he commented on the last trumpet, he declared, “The word ‘trumpet’ refers to some evident and striking sign, which elsewhere is called ‘the voice of the Archangel and ... trumpet of God’” (1 Thess. 4:15; “The School of Anselm of Laon,” in Fairweather (ed.), *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 474).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) asserts that Paul forbids his readers “to indulge in inordinate sorrow” (v. 13; *Commentary*, 34). A person grieves, he suggests, first, because of the separation of soul from the body, and second, because death is so painful to friends. “Thirdly, we mourn because death reminds us of our sin. ‘The

wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23)." Fourth, death reminds us of our own death. Hence moderate sorrow is permitted. But "our commonwealth is in heaven, from whence we await a Saviour ... who will change our lowly body ..." (Phil. 3:20; *Commentary*, 35). "Sleep" thus denotes death. "After sleep a man gets up much more refreshed and restored." Paul convincingly establishes the resurrection, on the basis of Christ's resurrection. He also rules out any suspicion of a delay (4:15). We have observed the firm rejection of the view that "we" meant Paul, by Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret. Aquinas takes it a step further. He says that the belief "All this should come about while the Apostle is still alive" is a "*misunderstanding*" of Paul, which Paul had to correct in 2 Thess. 2:2 (36, my emphasis). In 2 Thessalonians he pleads for calm and rationality in the face of "eschatological enthusiasm." Therefore in using the word "we," he says, Paul "is *not* talking at present about *himself* and his contemporaries" (36, my emphasis).

Aquinas next refers to 1 Cor. 15:52, "In the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet," and the Lord's descending from heaven with a cry of command. In vv. 16–17 Paul shows "the order and manner of the resurrection," based on Christ's resurrection (*Commentary*, 37). "All the dead shall rise in the presence of Christ." Divine power, the humanity of Christ, and perhaps the power of angels constitute instrumental, not efficient, causes. Humans remain "corporeal creatures" with "the restoration of bodies," even though also transformed (37). Thomas links with this Acts 1:11, "will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." The *voice* of Christ plays a part. Jn. 5:28 promises "They shall hear his voice." "The dead shall rise and come to judgement" in obedience to his voice (*Commentary*, 38). The sound of the trumpet also indicates divine power and command. In the Old Testament it signifies a call to war (Wis. 5:20), but also a call to celebration. Like Augustine, Aquinas says of those who will still be alive at the Parousia that in that moment "they shall die, and immediately afterwards they will rise" (*Commentary*, 39). "They will die and rise while they are being taken up" (39), in an "instant." Thomas concludes, "All will die and all will rise at the same time" (39). However, Aquinas firmly qualifies "all." He asserts, "Evil people will remain on the earth that they loved; while the good people will be taken up to the Christ whom they had sought" (*Commentary* 40). This may be a version of the so-called "rapture," but is not explicitly described in precisely these terms in 1 Thessalonians. Aquinas also associates "into the clouds" with the manifestation of the glory of God.

Thomas repeats the Augustinian theme: "All who are alive at the coming of our Lord will die, and rise again shortly" (*Summa Theologiae* 2.1, qu. 81, art. 3, ad. 1). He also discusses the role of angels in the resurrection, citing 1 Thess. 4:15: "The Lord shall come down from heaven ... with the voice of an archangel ... and the dead shall rise again! Therefore the resurrection of the dead will be accomplished by angelic ministry" (*Summa*, supplement to 3, qu. 76, art. 3). Again, he refers to

Augustine, and also to Gregory. As in his *Commentary*, he stresses that Christ's resurrection is the efficient cause of ours (qu. 76, art. 1). The sound of the trumpet is an instrumental cause (qu. 76, art. 2). He discusses the timing and manner of the resurrection in qu. 77, arts. 1–4, but depends more on 1 Corinthians 15 than on 1 Thess. 4:13–18. The wider topic of the last judgment and future resurrection is addressed in the *Summa*, supplement to 3, qu. 75–99.

*The Corpus Christi Mystery Plays* (probably c. 1420 in the Chester Cycle and c. 1470 in the York Cycle) regularly deal with the fall of Lucifer, the creation and fall of human beings, the narratives of biblical figures from Cain to Lazarus, the passion and resurrection, and the last judgment. At “Doom’s day” the wicked are taken into hell; the “good” are taken to paradise with angels and saints. After the eleventh century and Thomas Aquinas, less interest was shown in end events until the Black Death (1328–51) and the Peasants’ Revolt (1381). These disasters again prompted thoughts about apocalyptic. Clearly 1 Thess. 4:13–17 lies in the background as a primary source, even if amplified by the book of Revelation. Religious lyrics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries remain relevant, including “How Christ shall come.”

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) writes, “Paul preaches everywhere with great joy the resurrection of Christ, because through it law and sin, death and hell ... have all been conquered” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Early Theological Works*, 61). After quoting 1 Cor. 15:57, he returns to 1 Thess. 4:13, “We do not wish you to be ignorant concerning those who are asleep ...” He also compares Hos. 13:14, “O death, I will be thy death ...” He comments, “He who fears death or is not willing to die, is not sufficiently Christian ... It is only the sense of sin that makes death horrible, as Paul says, ‘The sting of death is sin’ (1 Cor. 15:56)” (61–2). Luther also quotes 1 Thess. 4:15–17 fully during his exposition of 1 Corinthians 15. He comments that 1 Thess. 4:15–17 explains “in greater detail” what is set forth about the body and its change in 1 Cor. 15:51–3:

There [in 1 Thess. 4:15–17] he [Paul] points out that everything will happen together and in the twinkling of an eye. The dead will be removed from their graves, and we will be carried away with them, however and wherever we may be found. We will be torn from this mortal life and existence, and all will be glorified together. That is what Paul means when he says, “We shall not all sleep.” It cannot and will not happen so slowly ... We will all be gathered together ... and all will be changed together. (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 28: *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7 and 15, Lectures on 1 Timothy*, 200–1)

Like Augustine, he insists that death must precede resurrection for everyone, and the event will be speedy, if not instantaneous. “The whole world will lie in ruins and be changed. We will be ... with Christ forever” (201).

In 1532 Luther wrote to Thomas Zink, whose son, John, had just matriculated from Wittenberg when he fell seriously ill and died. Luther wrote to the bereaved father a letter of pastoral consolation: “He [John] did not have a ... pitiful death ... Grieve in such a way as to console yourselves. For you have not lost him, but have only sent him on ahead of you, to be kept in everlasting blessedness. St. Paul says that we should not mourn over the departed, over those who have fallen asleep, like the heathen (1 Thess. 4:13)” (*Letters*, 65). Luther here writes in the same vein as Paul in 1 Thess. 4:13.

**John Calvin** (1509–64) states that in vv. 13–18 Paul refers to the resurrection as “a thing that was not in doubt” (*Commentary*, 47). But there is still room to address those who grieve because of the loss of loved ones. He writes, “He intends to curb excessive grief,” which would not have occurred if the readers had “kept it [the resurrection] in the forefront of their minds.” The term “asleep” is one in which “the bitterness of death is mitigated, for there is a great deal of difference between sleeping and being reduced to nothing” (48; v. 13). Paul based his argument on the death and resurrection of Christ (see 1 Cor. 15:13), from which we derive ours (v. 14). In v. 15 he expounds what is “incredible to the human mind” (49). Calvin asserts: “The order of the resurrection, Paul says in effect, will begin with those who have already departed; and we shall not rise without them” (49). Some had imagined that life belonged only to those who were alive at Christ’s coming. Paul “was speaking in the first person ... to arouse the Thessalonians to wait for this last day,” *not because he thought that he personally would survive until the Parousia*. Christ would return at any time. In v. 16 the archangel will act as a herald. The trumpet ushers in the magnificent appearance of Christ as judge.

Against Augustine, Calvin asserts those who are alive at the final coming of Christ “will not experience death” (*Commentary*, 50). But he respects Augustine’s arguments in *City of God*. On 1 Cor. 15:36, he states, “A sudden change is like death” (50). God can destroy and renew us by his power: “What is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor. 5:4). He asserts, “Those who are asleep put off the *substance* of the body for some space of time, but those who will be suddenly changed will put off the *quality*” (50; emphasis original). We shall be gathered to Christ and be with him for ever (v. 17). This refutes the “fantasies” of Origen.

Calvin discusses the truth of the doctrine of resurrection (*Institutes* 3.25.3), the power of God (3.25.4), and eternal felicity (3.25.10). He refers to 1 Thess. 4:15 where he considers certain difficulties, including the point that “those who are then alive [i.e., at the Parousia] shall not take precedence of the dead”

(*Institutes* 3.25.8; tr. Beveridge, 2.272). His other reference to 1 Thess. 4:13–18 occurs in his discussion of Christ’s work as redeemer, including Christ’s own death and resurrection. It remains true, Calvin says, that “the quick and the dead shall be summoned to judgement (1 Thess. 4:16)” (*Institutes* 2.16.17; tr. Beveridge, 1.451).

**Edmund Spenser** (1552–99) wrote *The Faerie Queen*, in which the Redcrosse Knight battles with the dragon. The Knight is knocked into “the Well of Life,” from which he rises “new born,” receiving from the Tree of Life a healing balm. This becomes an allegory of resurrection (*The Fairie Queen*, 1, canto 11). In religious terms this represents the victory of Christ over death and the devil, the future resurrection, and the defeat of the Roman Catholic Church by the Church of England and Protestantism. The Redcrosse Knight represents all Christians, but in political terms it invokes legends of Arthur, and the Faerie Queen is Queen Elizabeth I. The Well of Life points to baptism, and the Tree of Life to Holy Communion. The Redcrosse Knight battles against false religion until the end of the world. The closest link with 1 Thess. 4:14–17 is resurrection, even in allegory.

**Estius** (1542–1613) writes that Paul is concerned about the grief of “those Thessalonians who have lost loved ones, and urges them not to grieve as if they were Gentiles who have no hope” (*Commentarius*, 2.577). He calls their death “sleep,” because their lives are not extinguished, but they will *wake* to life. He appeals to Augustine’s interpretation, and argues that this is no new teaching (578). It is bound up with faith in the resurrection of Christ (vv. 13–14). This is a word from the Lord, not a human word (see Galatians 1). Estius comments on “We who are alive” (579): Paul uses the first person for “we” (*nos*) who are “alive and remain, not as if the future coming of the Lord is doubtful,” but because the day of the Lord will be both instant, yet preceded by certain events, as he explains in 2 Thessalonians. Like others, Estius comments that Christ will come with a cry of command, and his appearing will be magnificent and glorious, and will involve the angels (vv. 15–16). He notes that Erasmus, too, stresses the cry of command. All will hear his voice. It is comparable with “Lazarus, come forth!” and the voice of the archangel Michael (Jude 9; Rev. 12:7). The dead who sleep shall rise from their graves (580). He alludes to Matt. 24:29–31, where “The sun shall be darkened ... stars will fall from heaven.” We shall be caught up together to meet Christ. Again he returns to the puzzle, “We, who are alive and remain,” and responds more clearly, “I reply that this is *not to say ‘the Apostle’*” (581, my emphasis). “We” who are Christ’s will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord.

The play *All’s Well that Ends Well* by **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616) was first performed in 1602–3. In it the character Helena willingly embraces death to set free Bertram, the man she loves. She cries:

I am undone! There is no living, none,  
 If Bertram be away. 'Twere all but one  
 That I should love a bright particular star  
 And think to wed it; he is so far above me ...  
 The hind that would be mated by the lion  
 Must die for love.

(1.1.84–7, 91–2).

Everyone believes that she is dead until she suddenly reappears, exposes the truth, and sets in motion a new beginning. Here Shakespeare presents the theme of resurrection, although it has no direct connection with 1 Thess. 4:13–17. Likewise in *The Winter's Tale* Paulina sets in motion a “reawakening” of the lifelike “statue” of Hermione. Paulina declares to Leontes:

It is required  
 You do awake your faith. They all stand still;  
 Oh! Those that think it is unlawful business  
 I am about, let them depart ...  
 Music, awake her; strike!  
 'Tis time; descend; be stone no more; approach; ...  
 Dear life redeems you. You perceive she stirs  
 [*Hermione comes down*]

Start not; her actions shall be holy as  
 You hear my spell is lawful; do not shun her  
 Until you see her die again ...  
 LEONTES: O, she's warm!  
 (5.3.96–114).

The theme of a resurrection-like event is understood in several ways in Shakespeare's plays, including *All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* (see further David Lyle Jeffrey (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, 664).

**George Herbert** (1593–1633) approaches nearer to vv. 13–18 in his poem “The Dawning.” He writes:

Awake sad heart, whom sorrow ever drowns;  
 Take up thine eyes, which feed the earth;  
 Unfold thy forehead gather'd into frowns;  
 Thy Saviour comes, and with him mirth ...  
 Arise sad heart, if thou doe not withstand  
 Christ's resurrection thine may be:  
 Do not by hanging down break from the hand,

Which as it riseth, raiseth thee:  
Arise, arise;  
And with his burial linen drie thine eyes;  
Christ left his grave-clothes, that we might, when grief  
Draws tears, or bloud, not want a handkerchief.

(*Poems*, 102)

Herbert follows our passage to expound comfort in grief, the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection, and the final coming of Christ.

**Richard Baxter** (1615–91) represents the Puritan tradition, but was also a priest of the Church of England. In his most celebrated work *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, he argues that no Christian should expect this “rest” in the present. Then he addresses “*our unreasonable unwillingness to die*” (emphasis original), which indicates “infidelity,” implying doubt about the promise of glory; coldness of love, reflecting lack of gladness at the presence of Christ; and insufficient “weariness of sins.” It suggests also lack of sensitivity about “the vanity of earth.” “Unwillingness to die doth actually impeach us of high treason against the Lord. Is it not choosing the earth before Him?” He argues, “Not to die is not to be happy” (*Saints' Everlasting Rest*, ch. 10).

Baxter discusses “The Glorious Appearing of Christ,” the general resurrection, the last judgment, and “the saints’ coronation.” He declares, “If the heavenly host, for the celebration of his nativity, must praise God, with what shoutings will saints and angels at that day proclaim glory to God?” (*Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 2.1). “Shall not the saints, with inconceivable gladness, cry, ‘Yonder is he whose blood redeemed us?’” He continues, “Another thing that leads to paradise is that great work of Jesus Christ in raising the body from the dust.” He then quotes from 1 Thess. 4:16–17, “The dead in Christ shall rise first. Then they who are alive and remain shall be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord. Triumph now, O Christian, in these promises” (2.2). He expounds the last judgment with the words, “O terrible, O joyful, day ... Joyful to the saints” (2.3). Finally, he turns to “the coronation of the saints,” when Christ is anointed king and priest, and the saints receive “a crown of righteousness.” He concludes the chapter, “Thus we have seen the Christian safely landed in paradise, and conveyed honourably to his rest.” The imagery draws on 1 Thess. 4:15–17, 1 Cor. 15:42–57, and Revelation 21.

As a hymn-writer, Baxter reflected on the place of angels. One of his best-known hymns begins:

Ye holy Angels bright,  
Who wait at God's right hand,  
Or through the realms of light  
Fly at your Lord's command.  
Assist our song,

Or else the theme  
 Too high would seem,  
 For mortal tongue.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 546)

**John Bunyan** (1628–88), a Baptist preacher of humble origins, was imprisoned as a Dissenter. He is renowned in literature as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which provides an allegory of the Christian life from “the City of Destruction” (departure from which represents the dawn of Christian awareness) to “the Celestial City” (death and resurrection). The climax occurs when Christian reaches “the heavenly Jerusalem, the innumerable company of angels, and ... just men made perfect” (*The Pilgrim's Progress*, 166). The saints are clothed with glory and majesty. Bunyan writes, “When He shall come with the sound of the trumpet in the clouds; as upon the wings of the wind, you shall come with Him ... Now ... a company of the heavenly host came out to meet them” (167). Christian and his company were welcomed, “being swallowed up with the sight of angels ... and they thought they heard all the bells therein [in the city] to ring, to welcome them thereto” (168). And as they entered the City, “they were transfigured ... There were also that met them with harps and crowns, and gave them to them ... The bells in the City rang again for joy” (169). It was said to them “Enter ye into the joy of our Lord ... for ever and ever” (169). Bunyan combines several biblical sources, not least 1 Thess. 4:13–18.

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79), writing in 1685 begins with the pastoral statement that Paul does not condemn the readers' sorrow, “but the excess of it” (*Commentary*, 3.744). To redress their excess of sorrow, Paul instructs them about the resurrection. Like others, he notes the logic of *sleep*. The dead “sleep in Jesus” (v. 14; 745). Paul now turns to the Lord's coming (v. 15), accompanied by the ministry of angels and the sound of the trumpet. The saints “then living on the earth shall not be with Christ sooner than those that were fallen asleep” (745). Like others, he sees the Lord's cry (v. 16) as a command (a performative utterance). The trumpet may be a symbolic expression of divine power. Similarly, “snatched up” may “denote its suddenness” (745). Believers meet Christ to congratulate his coming, and to honor him. Yet their first meeting will be “in the air” (746).

## The Eighteenth Century

**Thomas Ken** (1637–1711) wrote the hymn “Glory to thee, my God, this night,” which includes this verse:

Teach me to live, that I may dread  
The grave as little as my bed;  
Teach me to die, that so I may  
Rise glorious at the awful day.

**Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) observes, “Grief for the death of friends is lawful; we may weep for our loss, though it may be their gain ... Grace does not do away our natural affections ... Yet the doctrines of resurrection and the second coming of Christ are a remedy against fear of death” (*Concise Commentary*, on 1 Thess. 4:13–14).

**Isaac Watts** (1674–1748), the hymn-writer, brilliantly conveys, in symbolic form the content of Paul’s hope in the following hymn:

There is a land of pure delight  
Where saints immortal reign;  
Infinite day excludes the night,  
And pleasures banish pain.

There everlasting spring abides  
And never-withering flowers;  
Death, like a narrow sea, divides,  
This heavenly land from ours ...

But timorous mortals start and shrink  
To cross the narrow sea,  
And linger shivering on the brink,  
And fear to launch away.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 536)

**Johann Albrecht Bengel** (1687–1752) writes on 1 Thess. 4:13–15 (1741), that the Christian religion “does not ... embitter, but sweetly soothes that finest of the affections, grief for the dead, whether recently or long since departed” (*Gnomon*, 802; *New Testament Word Studies*, 2.483). Like others, he notes of the logic of “sleep” (v. 14; Greek, *koimēthentas*). “We who are alive” (v. 15) stands in contrast to “those who are asleep” (484). Paul implies “the fewness of the living, compared with the multitude of the dead” at the Parousia. The reference to “we who are alive,” he writes, changes with each generation. “Shout” (v. 16; Greek, *keleusma*) implies a command. *Together* (v. 17; Greek, *hama*) “is an adverb of time,” while the second *together* (Greek, *homou*) is “of place” (484).

**John Gill** (1697–1771) argues that the resurrection cannot be known by natural reason, but by revelation. Hence in 4:13–14 Paul declares that “the heathen had no faith in this doctrine” (*A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* 7.4.1).

The Athenian philosophers in Acts 17 thought the concept incredible. Notions such as the transmigration of the soul have nothing to do with the biblical doctrine of resurrection. The resurrection depends on “the omnipotence of God” (7.4.1). Gill writes, reproducing Paul, “The dead in Christ shall rise first” (7.4.2a). Resurrection involves “the creation of a new body” (7.4.2b). He compares 1 Cor. 15:42–53. The body is “new, aerial, celestial” and “pure and holy.” “The same body that sleeps is awakened out of it.” If there were no continuity, it would be creation rather than resurrection. “The resurrection of Christ’s body is a proof of this truth” (7.4.2b–3). The final resurrection will be “a stupendous affair” (7.4.3). It greatly helps “to support saints under the loss of near relations” (1 Thess. 4:13, 44; 7.4.4).

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88), John’s younger brother, composed many hymns on the theme of the Parousia and the future resurrection. The famous hymn, “Hail the day that sees him rise” includes the following verses:

Master, parted from our sight,  
High above your azure height,  
Grant our hearts may thither rise,  
Following thee beyond the skies.

There we shall with thee remain,  
Partners of thy endless reign;  
There thy face forever see,  
Find our heaven of heavens in thee!

(J. R. Watson (ed.), *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns*, 173)

Wesley composed one of our best-known Advent hymns, “Lo! He comes with clouds descending,” of which the second verse continues:

Every eye shall now behold Him  
Robed in dreadful majesty;  
Those who set at nought and sold Him,  
Pierced and nailed Him to the Tree,  
Deeply wailing,  
Shall the true Messiah see.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 51)

Wesley wrote a poem that is close in theme to 1 Thess. 4:17–18, “On the Death of his Son”:

Dead! dead! the Child I lov’d so well!  
Transported to the world above!  
I need no more my heart conceal,

I never dar'd indulge my love;  
But nay I not indulge my grief,  
And seek in tears a said relief? ...

From us, as we from him, secure,  
Caught to his heavenly Father's heart,  
He waits, till we the bliss incur,  
From all these stormy sorrows rest,  
And see him with our Angel stand,  
To waft, and welcome us to land.

(Donald Davie [ed.], *New Oxford Book  
of Christian Verse*, 165)

## The Nineteenth Century

The English Romantic poet **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** (1772–1834), suffered from severe anxiety and depression, for which he sought relief in the use of opium. In parts 3–7 of one of his most celebrated poems, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, he writes of death and resurrection:

Four times fifty living men  
(And I heard not a sigh nor a groan)  
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,  
They dropped down one by one.  
The souls did from their bodies fly –  
They fled to bliss or woe!

In part 6, he writes:

Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat,  
And, by the holy rood!  
A man all light, a seraph-man,  
On every corse there stood.

Finally in part 7, he concludes:

He prayeth best, who loveth best,  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God, who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all ...  
A sadder and wiser man,  
He rose the morrow morn.

(*Ancient Mariner*, pts. 3, 6, 7)

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) argues that 1 Thessalonians “contains ... entirely general encouragements ... Only in the fourth chapter (4:13–17) mention is made of a particular point which affords an insight into the special condition of the church in Thessalonica” (*Commentary* 375). If the readers were former Gentiles, the doctrine of the future coming might have been unknown to the readers. Without teaching, they were in danger of “fanatical vagaries” (412). They did not doubt the resurrection as such, but thought that those already departed might have lost what others would have. Paul wanted to keep hope for the second advent alive. Olshausen seems to claim that a “first” resurrection of the dead will occur before the “universal” resurrection. He writes, “At Christ’s coming again these [the dead] will arise *first*, consequently none can arise before them” (v. 18; 416, emphasis original). The descent of Christ will be visible to all, and “will have an annihilating effect on the wicked, and ... Antichrist” (see 2 Thess. 1:8; 2:8; 417). At the sound of the trumpet “God’s energy, which penetrates and calls into life all things, permanently accompanies His [Christ’s] descent” (418).

**Charles Dickens** (1812–70) seems to include resurrection as a concept 10 times in *A Tale of Two Cities*, even if symbolically. In bk. 1, ch. 3, Mr. Lorry dreams of digging a man out of the earth, symbolizing a resurrection, and pointing to liberation from prison. In ch. 4 Mr. Lorry sees the man as buried alive and resurrected, an idea repeated in ch. 6. In bk. 2, ch. 3, Mr. Darnay is “resurrected” from torture and execution. In ch. 13, Sydney Carton’s love “resurrects” buried feelings in him. In ch. 14, bodies are dug out of graves. In ch. 16, Darnay’s true identity is “resurrected.” In ch. 18 Dr. Manette’s fears are resurrected. In bk. 3, ch. 6, Dr. Manette himself is resurrected, and can return to France. Finally, in bk. 3, ch. 15, Sydney Carton’s self-sacrifice “resurrects” Darnay. None of this depends on 1 Thess. 4:13–17, but it reflects an awareness of death and resurrection in the English novel.

**Henry Alford** (1810–71), dean of Canterbury, commented on 1 Thess. 4:13–18 in his *Greek Testament* and composed one of the best-known hymns on the theme of the final resurrection. He argues that some may have distorted the theme of the Parousia to avoid everyday work (*Greek Testament* 3.272–3). The ground of their grief, however, may have been lack of belief in the resurrection. He also argues: “We who are alive” (Greek, *hēmeis hoi zōntes*) means that, “Beyond question, *he himself* [Paul] *expected to be alive ... at the Lord’s coming*” (27, my emphasis). He rejects the view to the contrary of Theodoret, Chrysostom, and “the majority of ancient commentators, down to Bengel” (274). We must take the words “in their only plain grammatical meaning.” Those who are alive are a different category from those who sleep. The descent of Christ “On the clouds” is borrowed from Old Testament imagery, and Paul did not intend this as a literal description (276).

As a hymn-writer, Alford is more memorable. Two of four verses read as follows:

Ten thousand times ten thousand  
In sparkling raiment bright,  
The armies of the ransom'd Saints  
Throng up the steps of light:  
'Tis finish'd,  
Their fight with death and sin;  
Fling open wide the golden gates,  
And let the victors in ...  
Oh, then what raptured greetings  
On Canaan's happy shore,  
What knitting sever'd friendships up,  
Where partings are no more!  
Then eyes with joy shall sparkle  
That brimm'd with tears of late;  
Orphans no longer fatherless,  
Nor widows desolate.

*(Hymns Ancient and Modern, 222)*

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93) observes how sad death must have been for those uninstructed in the resurrection hope (*Thessalonians*, 80). Yet in the case of the readers, sadness arose not from this, but from concern that those who died before Christ's future coming would fully be in the reign of Christ. Pagan notions of immortality were quite different. Paul relieves their concern and hence their grief, and gives them added confidence that he is passing on the word of Christ. This may have been a historical word of Jesus, passed on to Paul (82). "We who are alive and remain," Jowett argues, can be understood "as a figure of the living in general," although "the words imply the immediate expectation of Christ's coming" (83). Paul would not have used "we" if he had thought the coming of Christ was distant. In v. 16 Paul does not discuss the destiny of the wicked. He concludes, "The first act of the last drama ... is the resurrection of the dead who are to meet Christ" (83). "In the air" accords with the Apocalypse and its imagery (84–5).

**Charles J. Ellicott** (1816–1905) was professor of divinity at London and Cambridge, and then bishop of Gloucester. Ellicott writes that the infant Thessalonian church apparently suffered from "a feverish anxiety about the state of those who had departed" (*Commentary*, 61). He dissents from Chrysostom and Theodore that their problem concerned resurrection. It concerned what share the departed would enjoy at the Parousia. Grief was caused not only by the loss of loved ones, but by anxiety about "their

participation in Christ's advent" (62). The reference to the death and resurrection of Christ (v. 14) provides "the two foundations of Christian faith" (62). Against Lünemann, Ellicott declares, "The deduction from these words ['we who are alive and remain'] that St. Paul 'himself expected to be alive,' Alford, with Jowett, Lünemann ... must fairly be *pronounced more than doubtful*" (64, my emphasis). He asserts, "Paul ... classes himself with 'those who are *being left* [present] on earth' (cf. Acts 2:47) without being conceived to imply that he had any definite expectations as to his own case" (64; emphasis original). He simply distinguishes himself at the time of writing from "those who have fallen asleep." Hence "he naturally identifies himself with the class to which he then belonged" (64). Everyone except God himself was ignorant of the time of the coming of Christ, including Christ (Mark 13:32).

**J. B. Lightfoot** (1828–89) declares that the agitation of the church about the dead had been reported to Paul by Timothy (*Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, 63). He suggests: "The contrast between the gloomy despair of the heathen and the triumphant hope of the Christian mourner is nowhere more forcibly brought out than by monumental inscriptions" (63). "Sleep" implies "*first* peaceableness, and *secondly* ... an awakening" (65, emphasis original). "We who are alive and remain" (v. 15) raises the obvious question of how far expected the Parousia was during his lifetime. Paul's ignorance of the timing of the coming of Christ, he says, "should create no difficulty" (66). On the other hand he speaks as if there were "a reasonable expectation of the Lord's coming in his own lifetime" (64). But this is a "positive assurance" that it would occur then. It is important to stress that *expectation does not grow weaker in his later epistles*. He cites Phil. 4:5 and 1 Cor. 16:22.

## Note on "the Rapture" in Dispensationalist Views of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17

John Nelson Darby (1800–82) provides a well-known source for the dispensationalist approach, followed by the influential Scofield Reference Bible, published in 1909 (see Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 24). Such is the widespread notion of "the rapture" in much popular interpretation that this invites comment. Darby was an Anglican clergyman and also a leader of the Plymouth Brethren, who interpreted many of the themes in Daniel and in Revelation as prophecies concerning the future or still to be fulfilled.

We perhaps need to clarify three key terms. (1) *The rapture* (supposedly in 1 Thess. 4:16–17) is well defined by McGinn as "Christ's bodily rescue of the faithful by way of a collective, physical ascent to heaven" (*Antichrist*, 253). (2) *Dispensationalism* is an interpretation of biblical prophecy which interprets the

Bible as describing a series of “dispensations” or periods in which God places human beings under different “rules.” According to this approach, in McGinn’s words, “Prophecy took a holiday for almost two thousand years (the dispensation of the Gentiles) between the fall of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the restoration of the Jewish state in 1948” (*Antichrist*, 253). (3) *Premillennialism* is the belief (usually deriving from dispensationalism) that Christ will rescue or “snatch” the elect or “true” believers (in the rapture) from the dire tribulation that comes before the end, and thereby he enables them to avoid the ravages of the Antichrist. During the period of tribulation they will be in heaven.

Darby originated “dispensationalism.” The present period of history, or dispensation, beginning, it is said, with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, will culminate in the “rapture” of the faithful. Although he was English, Darby strongly influenced American “fundamentalism” (see Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, 22–4, and Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 36–40). Darby, however, was not the first to concentrate attention on the millennium. Among others, William Miller and the Millerites (future Seventh-Day Adventists), the Mormons, and early nineteenth-century America were said to be “drunk on the millennium” (Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 42). Belief in the millennium (a thousand-year period) is based on Rev. 20:4–6 (see Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 201–14, especially on Tertullian, Hippolytus, Augustine, and others in the patristic period; Joachim of Fiore, Peter Olivi, and others in the medieval period; and Jon Bale, Joseph Mede, and others in the early modern period).

“Historicist” interpretations among such writers as Henry Drummond (1786–1860) and Edward Irving (1792–1834) applied some prophesied events to the present. Some saw Napoleon II as the Antichrist figure, and in the twentieth century historicists viewed Mussolini, Hitler, or Stalin as oppressive antichrists. But following Darby, this view was overtaken by a premillennialist view that Christ would return to initiate the 1,000-year earthly kingdom (see McGinn, *Antichrist*, 245–54). Darby, however, proposed the notion that Christ would return *twice*. The first return would involve “the rapture” of the faithful (see 1 Thess. 4: 17, which uses the word “caught up” or “snatched”). These faithful believers would then not experience a seven-year period of “tribulation” or suffering. Cyrus Scofield took up Darby’s view in the United States in an annotated edition of the King James Bible (1909). He refers to two returns of Christ in 1 Cor. 15: 24 (*Schofield Reference Bible*, 1227).

Two pivotal moments were the Balfour Declaration of 1917, when Lord Balfour, the British foreign secretary, proposed the founding of a Jewish state, and its fulfillment in 1948 when the Jewish state became a reality. John F. Walvoord, president and then chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary,

described this as “the most significant prophetic event in the twentieth century” (*Armageddon*, 218). Hal Lindsey, who studied at Dallas Theological Seminary, became a close collaborator and popularizer of Walvoord, and as early as 1970 published *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which made a huge public impact in America. He weaves together 1 Thess. 4:15–17 with Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation. He writes, “There will be those who will be transported into a glorious place more beautiful, more awesome, than we can possibly comprehend” (127). The prophets foretold “world events,” which would lead to a seven-year period before the return of Christ.

Hal Lindsey’s account of prophesied “world events” may appear unduly dated. He predicted World War III, as the United States and the Soviet Union or the communist bloc sought to destroy each other. Allied to this, or prior to it, would be an Arab–Israeli confrontation. Lindsay wrote, “The most important sign in Matthew has to be the restoration of the Jews to the land in the rebirth of Israel” (*The Late Great Planet Earth*, 53). The 1980s were supposedly the countdown to Armageddon. There must be “a repossession of the Temple site in ancient Jerusalem” (55). “African nations will be united and allied with the Russians in the invasion of Israel” (68). Lindsey proposed that even the Common Market or European Community represents the 10-nation confederacy predicted by the book of Revelation (94; see Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 153). In addition to depending on a literalist interpretation of much symbolic prophecy, none of this allows for the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the iron curtain. Yet many still follow Darby’s eschatology. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, in the 16 books of their *Left Behind* series (1995–), fictionalized accounts of the rapture and its effects. Apparently, these popular books have sold millions. The view has to be addressed, although few biblical specialists would endorse its main claims.

# 1 Thessalonians

5:1–11

## **The Day of the Lord: Timing and Light**

### **Introduction and Overview**

The present section coheres as a unity, but also may form two parts: dates and timing (vv. 1–3); and the status of Christians as “children of light” (vv. 4–11). They should not be caught unawares by the day of the Lord. Some make heavy weather out of the dual themes of the surprise coming and the need to be ready. Certain signs will precede it. The solution is provided by the analogy of “labour pains” experienced by a pregnant woman (v. 3). In labor, the moment of birth cannot be predicted precisely. A pregnant woman may be caught out.

But such phenomena as the breaking of waters happen first, even if events are telescoped together. Paul emphasizes that “about that hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Therefore, “be alert.”

Paul draws on an earlier tradition that the day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, “like a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2). Together with the analogy of labor pains, this is a second simile in Paul, which is derived from the Old Testament (Job 30:5; Jer. 2:26; 49:9; Joel 2:9; see also Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39). Abraham Malherbe notes Paul’s irony: “What you accurately know is that you cannot know what you seek to know” (Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 290). Hence the readers do not really need to have something written about this (5:1). The reference to “peace and security” in v. 3 reminds us of Amos 5:18–20: “Alas, you who desire the day of the Lord!” For some, “It is darkness, not light”; but Paul assures the readers that though it is terrifying, the day will bring light for “children of light.” Yet the day will still come as a surprise. Paul did not know in 4:12–18 whether he would remain alive until the Parousia.

The second part of this passage (5:4–11) speaks of Christians as “children of light.” This remains a regular Pauline theme. The day of the Lord will bring the secret things of darkness to light (1 Cor. 4:5); God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts” (2 Cor. 4:6); “The night has gone, the day is near; let us therefore lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light” (Rom. 13:12). The notion that God’s people are destined to live in the light is a theme in the Old Testament (Isa. 30:26; 60:19–20), just as darkness is associated with behavior which does not please God (Job 22:9–11; Pss. 74:20; 82:5). The dualism between light and darkness, which is pronounced in John (John 12:36), was once thought to betray Hellenistic influences. But it is now seen to be prevalent in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1 QS 3.13–4.26).

The warning not to sleep also comes in the sayings of Jesus (Mark 13:35–6), sometimes in the context of the “thief” simile: if the householder had known when the thief would come, he would not have slept but remained awake (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; see 1 Thess. 5:6). Verse 8 repeats that Christians belong to the daylight, and should be on the watch. We may compare this with the sun streaming in through the window in the morning, to reveal the trivia or drink of the night before as baubles, or tatters of a dream world in the solid light of day. “Waiting for the hope” is another Pauline theme (Gal. 5:5; 1 Cor. 1:7). The clause, “Whether we are awake or asleep, we live with him” (v. 10), sums up yet another Pauline theme: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so whether we live or die we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:8). Rudolf Bultmann calls this a great assertion of freedom. He comments, “[The Christian] no longer bears the care for himself, for his own life, but lets

this care go, yielding himself entirely to the grace of God” (*Theology of the New Testament*, 1.331). Paul anticipates his later emphasis on “putting on.” The Christian “puts on” incorruptibility (1 Cor. 15:53–4); he or she “puts on” Christ (Rom. 13:14) and “puts on” virtues (Col. 3:10–12). It is not surprising that many trace these verses to a common catechetical tradition. Even “building up” one another (v. 11) is a common Pauline theme (1 Cor. 14:3–5, 12, 17, 26; Rom. 14:19; 15:2).

## The Patristic Era

**Irenaeus** (c. 130–c. 200) cites v. 3: “When they shall say, ‘Peace and safety,’ then sudden destruction shall come upon them.” He is discussing the multiple meaning of “Antichrist,” although this term does not appear in the text of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. He compares prophecies concerning the “coming” of God in Jeremiah and in the Apocalypse (*Against Heresies* 5.30.2; ANF 1.559). He notes the huge power of the Antichrist, but urges caution about any overspecific identification of this figure.

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) makes considerable use of 1 Thess. 5:5–8: “Let us not then sleep, as do others, but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep, sleep in the night ... But you are all children of the light.” All four verses are quoted (*The Instructor* 2.9; ANF 2.258). He returns to this passage, quoting 1 Thess. 5:6–8, in *Stromata* 4.22 (ANF 2.435). Clement attacks sleep or sluggish self-indulgence among Christians. They must be vigilant and “awake towards God.” John tells of Christ as light and life (John 1:3–4). Christians have received wisdom, which invites light and sobriety. They must practice “everlasting vigil,” which excludes sleep. Wisdom (*phronēsis*) stems from Christian sobriety, in contrast to non-Christian Gnostics, who often celebrate their mysteries at night.

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) cites 5:1–3: “Of the times and the seasons, brethren, there is no necessity for my writing to you. For you yourselves know perfectly [accurately] that the Day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night” (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 24; ANF 3.563). Tertullian collects passages in Paul which witness to the future resurrection and the last judgment. He cites 1 Thess. 1:9–10; 2:19; 3:13; and 4:13–17; as well as 1 Cor. 15:19. This helps us to realize how frequent Paul’s references are to the resurrection in this short letter. “Times and seasons” is both Tertullian’s phrase and Paul’s, as an eschatological phrase. Christians are “already in God’s light” (see 1 Thess. 5:4–5; Rom. 13:12–13; and 1 John 1:5–7). He urges that “God enlightens.” Hence he alludes to “the lost sheep” and “the lost coin” in the parables, primarily referring to those who are in darkness (Tertullian, *On Modesty* 7; ANF 4.80). When he discusses

persecution, he explicitly quotes 1 Thess. 5:5: Christians must shine “as sons of light” (*Of Flight in Persecution* 9; ANF 4.121).

**Origen** (c. 185–253) does not appear to make use of 1 Thess. 5:1–11 in his extant writings, but anticipates Augustine’s connecting the “light” which Christians possess with the creation narrative in Genesis 1. God “divides” or “separates” light and darkness, and Origen and Augustine compare this with a spiritual division of souls that come to the light, and those who remain in darkness (*Homilies on Genesis* 1.5; *Commentary on John* 1.24; ANF 10.311).

**Cyprian** (d. 258) argues that the end of the world will come suddenly, and quotes 1 Thess. 5:2–3 to prove the point: “The Day of the Lord shall come as a thief in the night” (*Treatises* 89; ANF 5.553). These are a collection of doctrinal and practical aphorisms. They offer biblical proof-texts, and are perhaps catechetical or pastoral aphorisms.

**The Acts of Disputation with the Heresiarch Manes** (c. 277–8) quotes 1 Thess. 5:1–2 (*Disputation* 38; ANF 6.212). Archelaus, bishop of Caschar, was its supposed author. The Manichees were a threat to orthodox doctrine, and Archelaus calls Manes “worse than Marcion” or the Gnostics. Paul argues that Christians must be “as lights in the world” (see vv. 4–5), and await the last day, even if its date remains unknown (5:1–2). The Manichees flagrantly oppose such teaching, “creeping into houses” to seduce Christians from orthodox belief.

**Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 330–395) speaks of “children of light” and “children of the day” (1 Thess. 5:5). His topic is that of Christology, but he considers the biblical term “son.” In Hebrew, *son of* often means “sharing the character of,” as in “child of wrath.” Hence *Son of God* does not necessarily mean “born” in a genetic sense. Similarly *sons of the day* describe the character of Christians, not their origin “in respect of nature” (Gregory, *Against Eunomius* 3.6; NPNF2 5.148).

**Ambrose** (c. 338–97) cites 1 Thess. 5:1 in exactly the appropriate context. He discusses our lack of knowledge of the date of the future coming of Christ. But, he argues, this is for our advantage. Jesus witnesses to this in Matt. 24:44, “You know not at what hour”; Paul witnesses to it in v. 1: “It is not for you to know the times or years . . .”; Luke witnesses to it in Acts 1:7 (Ambrose, *Of the Christian Faith* 5.17.211; NPNF2 10.311). This is to the “advantage” of Christians, for it encourages watchfulness, and even a measure of fear. It is like the duty of a soldier who is on watch in the camp.

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) declares, “This is just what the Lord said in the Gospel . . . He will appear suddenly . . ., as the first ray of dawn appears from the East to the West, having with him the host of the army of God the Father” (*Commentarius in Epistolas Paulinas*, 3.228; see also *Commentaries*, 109). God’s army will destroy the Antichrist, just as the followers of the Antichrist feel safe. “Sudden destruction will come on them” (228). “Darkness” (v. 4) means ignorance. “Light” means knowledge of truth.

Hence believers are safe. Christians, then, must not act incautiously (*neglegenter*, 229), simply on the ground that they trust the Savior. Faith, hope, and love must remain their weapons. Whether we live or die, “we shall enjoy eternal life with him” (230).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) observes how characteristic it is of human nature to want to pry into what is obscure. People are like children, who are forever asking questions, even *questions that have no answer*. In the Gospels, the apostles ask: “When shall these things be?” (Matt. 24:23). Similarly the Thessalonians badger Paul with the same question. But he has already indicated that there is *no answer* (*Homily on 1 Thessalonians*, 9; NPNF1 13.360). Like Ambrose, he points out that to know would be no advantage. He comments, “Is not the end of his own life the consummation of every individual? Why are you curious ... about the general end?” (*Homily* 9; 360). Each thinks of anything except his personal situation! He cites Acts 1:7, “It is not for you to know times or seasons.” The coming of Christ will be “like a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2). He continues, “All await That Day, and no one is raised before it” (*Homily* 9; 361). Uncertainty about timing “shakes the souls of all.” We can no more know the date of our death. If we did know it, the result would be chaos. Chrysostom expands on this prospect, and concludes, “You see how many advantages there are ... from not knowing the time of our end” (*Homily* 9; 361). In v. 3 Chrysostom comments on the illusion of saying “Peace and safety [when] sudden destruction comes upon them.” The Old Testament provides a background: “Woe to them who desire the Day of the Lord” (Amos 5:18); it is darkness, not light. Chrysostom sees how “surprise” combines with signs of the time, by appealing to the labor pains and birth analogy (*Homily* 9; 362). Some bring forth even at the seventh month, but most at the ninth: “the image is exact.”

On vv. 4–11 Chrysostom asserts that Christians have abandoned a “darkness” that is impure. Thieves, adulterers, and wicked people choose night for their crimes. Those who are in the light remain watchful, and therefore come to no harm. Paul says, “For you are all sons of light, and sons of the day” (v. 5). Chrysostom seems to be aware of Gregory of Nyssa’s comments on “sons of,” for he offers the same examples, which denote not genetic origin but the same character. In vv. 6–8, he argues, Paul insists that to be “sons of light” depends on how humans respond. Christians must *live* as they *are*. The life of darkness “is full of dreams of phantasy. Riches are a dream, and glory” (*Homily* 9; NPNF2 13.363). Chrysostom continues that watchfulness is not enough. “We must also be armed.” We need to be armed with the common faith, and with hope and love (see 1 Cor. 13:13). We may hope for great things. Whether we live or die, we are with the Lord (vv. 10–11). The Christian is, as it were, dead to the world.

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428). Paul responds to the question of the readers in v. 1, “When will be the end of this age?” (*Commentarii*, 2.32). “Hence he

writes admirably to them that they do not need, nor do they reckon themselves able to learn ... because the time of the arrival of the Lord is uncertain” (32). For the coming will be like that of a thief (*fur*) in the night. The Judge will approach suddenly (v. 3). The time has been predetermined by God, yet to us it will seem uncertain and sudden. For, to use Paul’s explanatory simile, for women in labor the time of birth seems in part definite, following a course of months during which they wait. But Theodore adds, “Nevertheless in truth the day itself is uncertain; nor are they able to know it, unless pain suddenly creates it for them” (33). Since it is light and daytime for Christians, they are to be sober and watchful. The night is for sleep or for drunkenness (34). Since they belong to the day, they must be vigilant (v. 8).

**Augustine** (354–430) quotes in full “For you are all the children of the light, and the children of day; we are not of the night, nor of darkness” (1 Thess. 5:5; Augustine, *City of God* 11.7; NPNF1 2.209). He speaks of light at the creation of the world, but also of the nature of Christians as “light” or new creation. Today we might say that his eschatology is not fully “realized”: Christians often live in twilight, revealing the operation of two forces of light and darkness. The categories of believers and unbelievers are as distinct as God’s “*dividing* the light from the darkness” in the Genesis creation narrative (*City of God* 11.33, my emphasis; NPNF1 2.224).

Augustine quotes in full 1 Thess. 5:6–8, beginning, “Let us not therefore sleep, as do others, but let us watch and be sober; for they who sleep, sleep in the night” (*On the Trinity* 15.9.15; NPNF1 3.207). The context concerns revelation. Augustine expounds the verse, “We now see through a glass in an enigma, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). A parallel comes in 2 Cor. 3:18: “We ... beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image ...” These refer to a glass in which images become visible. To see “in an enigma” becomes an “allegory” or a “trope.” Light makes sight possible. 1 Thess. 5:6–8 may be an allegory or figure, but it is not an enigma. Christians, as those who are of the light, *have* knowledge of God, even if in the present it is largely by “image” or analogical knowledge (9:16). Elsewhere Augustine applies 1 Thess. 5:5 in a similar way. He writes, “Hope and endure until the day breaks ... We have received the earnest ... that we are now in the light ... we are children of light, and children of the day – not children of the night ... which we have been hitherto ... in this still uncertain state of human knowledge” (*Confessions* 13.14.15; *Confessions and Enchiridion*, 308).

## The Medieval Era

The Latin hymn, a translation of which follows, is generally attributed to the sixth century:

Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding;  
“Christ is nigh,” it seems to say;  
“Cast away the dreams of darkness,  
O ye children of the day?” ...

Lo! the lamb so long expected,  
Comes with pardon down from heav’n;  
Let us haste with tears of sorrow  
One and all to be forgiven;  
That when next He comes with glory  
And the world is wrapp’d in fear  
With His mercy He may shield us,  
And with words of love draw near.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 47)

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) replicates almost exactly the Latin text of Ambrosiaster and Theodore (*Opera Omnia*, PL 112/6.560). However, he offers further material in his *Sermons*. He warns his hearers against love of money or fame, and concludes: “If you love the glory of offices, hurry to be consoled in that higher court of the angels ... Everything you do in the world passes away at the Last Judgement ... Love the heavenly ... Neglect the temporal, and you can hold the everlasting Kingdom with Him who lives and reigns with God the Father” (*Sermon on Contempt for the World*, in McCracken and Cabaniss (eds.), *Early Mediaeval Theology*, 313).

**Cynwulf** (or Cynwulf) and other poets (800–c. 950) were the four Anglo-Saxon poets associated with *Elene*, *Christ II*, and parts of the *Exeter Book* (discussed above). *Elene* covers over 1,000 lines, and largely concerns the martyrs. Both *Elene* and *Christ II* speak of the world as *middangeard* (or *middle-earth*, as in J. R. R. Tolkien). *Elene* refers to “the light of the righteous,” cosmic battle, the time of the world, and God as “the King of the angels” (stanzas 1–2). The “land of the blessed” becomes free from woe, while there will be “surging flame” for the wicked. The blessed “will shine in beauty like the angels, and enjoy the heritage of the King of Glory for ever” (stanza 4). *Christ II* is the first poem of the *Exeter Book*, by Cynwulf. It deals with Christ’s ascension and the last judgment. *Christ II* and *III* also deal with the last judgment, when “sudden destruction” will come upon the disobedient (1 Thess. 5:3). God is “rigorous and righteous.”

**Robert Grosseteste** (c. 1170–1253), bishop of Lincoln, sees light as representing a Christian’s character. He writes, “Light is understood to mean the knowledge of the truth ... and darkness means the vicious lack of ordering of love ... In an allegorical sense the light is the wise and spiritual prelates of the Church, who shine with the knowledge of the truth ... Also light comes to be when the fleshly sense of Scripture breaks through into the spiritual sense ...

moving into spiritual understanding.” He continues, “Light is the vision of the truth through contemplation” (*On the Six Days of Creation* 2–4, in Anderson and Bellenger (eds.), *Medieval Worlds*, 210).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) argues that 5:1–11 first urges the readers “to prepare themselves for the coming judgement; secondly he [Paul] shows them how they should prepare themselves” (*Commentary*, 41). The first section concerns “knowledge about the future coming” and “what they did know about it” (42). Only God the Father knows the timing of the Parousia (Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7). Here, he warns, “The more words, the more vanity” (Eccles. 6:11). This day specially belongs to the Lord, because then his will is fulfilled in everyone. There are two aspects of it: (1) God desires “all to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4); and (2) “At the set time ... I will judge with equity” (2 Pet. 3:10). In both, “I will come like a thief” (Rev. 3:3); and there will be “an uncovering of our hearts” (1 Cor. 4:5; *Commentary*, 42–3). Evil people will imagine that it will be a time of “peace and security” (5:4; 43). Paul exposes this “false confidence.” People live “tranquilly” on the basis of ignorance (see Wis. 14:22; Luke 12:19, the parable of the foolish tower-builder). Sudden destruction will be “like a break in a high wall” (Isa. 30:13). There will be no escape: “The end of the world will not be a time of mercy, but of justice” (44).

Christians, however, are not “in darkness” (5:5; see John 8:1; 12:36). Aquinas writes, “Out of the faith of Christ comes the day which is the brilliance of good actions” (44). “The day is at hand ... Let us ... put on the armour of light” (Rom. 13:12). The “thief” analogy underlines surprise, as well as a need for vigilance. Sobriety means freedom from the cares of the world (45; see Luke 21:34). Night is “not for us,” but the wicked do their deeds when “sleep and drunkenness are suitable for nighttimes (45; see Job 24:15). The breastplate protects the heart, which is the source of life; the head is protected by a helmet, which “governs the body’s movements” (46). Hence Christians are to be armed with “the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (5:8). God has destined us to obtain salvation; we are a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9) through Christ, who died for us (vv. 9–10). “Whether we wake or sleep” (v. 10) is parallel with “Whether we live or die” (Rom. 14:8; *Commentary*, 47).

Thomas declares again, “The day of the Lord is said to come as a thief, because the exact time is not known” (*Summa Theologiae* 3 (suppl.), qu. 73, arts. 1–2). He refers to the last judgment and resurrection in *Summa Theologiae* 3 (suppl.), qu. 87, art. 3. He is concerned not to deny Augustine’s interpretation of Paul, but slightly modifies it by “a middle way.” Judgment will involve more than an instant, but also “a very short time.” He considers Augustine’s *City of God* 20 in qu. 87, art. 1 (*ad* 1) likewise.

**Geoffrey Chaucer** (c. 1343–1400) and the *Pearl* poem (c. 1380). The *Pearl* is a Middle English work whose author is uncertain, but was probably

contemporary with Chaucer. He probably composed *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which describes the final judgment and universal deluge, as God in his wrath destroys all that is impure. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* depict a doomsday scene in *The Parson's Tale*, which states, "The third cause to move a person to contrition is fear of the day of doom, and of the horrible pains of hell ... Greatly ought a person to fear such a judgement ... We have a Judge that cannot be corrupted or deceived." The "Parson" quotes Jerome and Anselm on the anguish of that day. The wicked will "lack the materials for light" and shall be "covered with the darkness of death." Lack of light is "lack of the sight of God." The sixth cause of contrition is "the hope of ... the glory of heaven." The whole contains much of what is said in 1 Thess. 5:1–11, except that bliss is often seen as "reward" and the fruit of penance, rather than as the fruit of grace. The destiny of believers is brighter than the sun.

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546), far from being an apocalyptic enthusiast, disapproved of fanatical excitement fueled by eschatological imminence. This emerges clearly in his letter of 1533 to his friend Michael Stiefel. Stiefel had a strong interest in the second advent, and believed that he could determine its time and date from the book of Daniel. He predicted the coming at 8 a.m. on October 19, 1533. Later he changed his prediction to Michaelmas. Luther wrote to him, "I did not suspect that you would become so excited about this ... matter," and with careful balance, "If that day should come before Michaelmas, you are not a sinner for believing and saying that it will. On the other hand, if it should not come then, we do not sin for believing that it can come at any hour. Anyone who believes that Christ can come at any hour also believes that he can come before Michaelmas ... This mistake does not endanger us ... Why, then, do you torment yourself so about this matter when either answer is safe?" (*Letters*, 301–2). Eighteen months later Stiefel set a time in October, the forty-second week from his starting point. On September 28, 1533 Luther wrote that Christ "was not to reveal it [the timing] to men, for he had not been sent to do this" (*Letters*, 303). Luther's pastoral concern, like Paul's, was "to set hearts at rest." He wrote against "the new false prophets who are now springing up and spreading everywhere" (*Letters*, 209).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) agreed that speculation about future dates is a "curious and unprofitable enquiry," even if preparation is always needed (*Commentary*, 51). It indicates "excessive incredulity" not to believe what the Lord said about the subject. Discussions about this, as Paul said, are not necessary. "Believers should not desire to know more than they are permitted to

learn.” What the readers do know with certainty is that “Christ will come suddenly and unexpectedly, and will take unbelievers by surprise” (51). Sleep comes from “contempt for God” (52). Paul condemns a spirit of carelessness. Indolence is dangerous and deadly. Calvin next takes up the pastoral and ethical application of vv. 4–11. “Darkness” stands for “living indulgent lives” in “ignorance of God.” Christ has shone on Christians, as Isaiah prophesied in Isa. 60:2. “Children of light” is a Hebrew idiom for “furnished with light” (53). Paul adds other metaphors: “It would be disgraceful to sleep or be drunk in the middle of the day.” Christians must avoid the stupor of a mind that has forgotten God. We are to cast off the cares of the world, and “rise up to heaven.” Paul therefore calls us to arms. We must fight, as in a war. We must be vigilant. Calvin warns the expositor against spending fruitless time finding significance in the different pieces of armor (v. 8; 54). This analogy is not quite like that of Eph. 6:14. The main point is “our perpetual war” and “being properly prepared” (54). In v. 9 Paul stresses the destiny of salvation because so often the day of the Lord is thought of with dread. He reminds us that Christ died for us that we might share his life (v. 10).

In the *Institutes* 1 Thess. 5:2 is invoked not in a chapter on eschatology, but in Calvin’s repudiation of the Catholic proliferation of the sacraments. Protestants strictly regard as “sacraments” the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper. Calvin considers the claims of confirmation, penitence, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage to be called *sacraments*. Marriage is an institution of God, but no one before Gregory called it a sacrament. Sacraments proper function to confirm promises. Calvin mocks the logic of Catholic theologians: “Everything in this way will be a sacrament ... even theft, seeing it is written ‘The day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night’ (1 Thess. 5:2)” (*Institutes*, 4.19.34; tr. Beveridge, 2.647). This part of Calvin’s case may seem weak, but he is at pains to distinguish the very broad sense in which very many objects or events may become object-lessons of God’s grace, and the unique significance of the two dominical sacraments. The further allusion to 1 Thess. 5:9 is less surprising in the context of establishing a defense of justification by grace (*Institutes*, 3.16.2; tr. Beveridge, 2.100). God has destined us “not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9; 3.14.1–16.2). These provide two explicit references to 1 Thess. 5:1–11. But he speaks often of the last judgment (*Institutes*, 2.16.17; 450); the last resurrection (3.25.2–12) and the future coming of Christ (*Institutes*, 3.25.1; 1.13.13).

**Estius** (1542–1613) likewise states that Paul has no need to answer a question arising from mere human curiosity. No answer can be known (*Commentarii*, 2.584). All will be raised at the end, and come to judgment. Christ told his disciples, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons.” He appeals to

Erasmus. The Greek *chronos* indicates a measure of time, but *kairos* signifies the opportune time. But the readers themselves know that the time is hidden. When the time is right, the Lord will come. Some think that “there is peace and security,” but the Lord will come at a time which cannot be predicted (vv. 1–3). He says, “you, brothers, are not in darkness” (v. 4; 585); you are enlightened by a living faith. Estius refers to Eph. 5:8, “Now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.” This involves sobriety, watchfulness, and conflict. Faith and love, and hope, are our weapons (v. 8).

**George Herbert** (1593–1633) provides a vision reminiscent of 1 Thess. 5:4 in “The Dawning”:

Awake, sad heart, whom sorrow ever drowns;  
Take up thine eyes, which feed on earth;  
Unfold thy forehead gather'd into frowns;  
Thy Saviour comes, and with him mirth;  
Awake, awake.

(*Poems*, 102)

**Jeremy Taylor** (1613–67) writes on 1 Thess. 5:6–8 in his section on “sobriety” in *Holy Living* (1650). He declares, “Christian sobriety is all that duty that concerns ourselves in the matter of meat and drink, and pleasures and thoughts; and it hath within it the duties of temperance, chastity, humility, modesty and content.” It uses “denial and frustration of our appetite ... by considering the evil consequences of sensuality, effeminacy, or fondness after carnal pleasures” (“Sobriety,” *Holy Living*, in *Selected Writings*, 67). He continues, “A longing after sensual pleasures ... makes it [the spirit] loose, soft, and wandering, unapt for noble, wise or spiritual employments” (67). The Christian’s life is “a wrestling and warfare, to which sensual pleasure disables him” (68). “A fight and actual war ... consists in prayer, in fasting, in cheap diet, hard lodging and laborious exercises ... making it [the spirit] severe, manly, and Christian” (68–9).

## The Eighteenth Century

**Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) declares, “It is useless to ask about the particular time of Christ’s coming. Christ did not reveal this to the apostles.” It is indeed our duty to observe the times allotted for our work, but not the time of a coming that will be sudden and its timing a surprise. This coming will be “terrible for the ungodly.” Destruction will overtake them, while they please themselves with vain amusements. The day will be “happy for the righteous.”

But most people do not consider “another world” at all, “because they are asleep.” Christians need the spiritual armor of faith, hope, and love. Faith tells us “that there is another world to prepare for.” He concludes, “We have ground on which to build unshaken hope,” especially when we consider that Christ died for us (1 Thess. 5:6–11).

**Isaac Watts** (1674–1748) is known for his hymns. One of the best known, composed in 1707, reads:

There is a land of pure delight  
Where saints immortal reign  
Infinite Day excludes the Night  
And pleasures banish pain.

*(Hymns Ancient and Modern, 536)*

A less well-known parallel is:

O the Delights, the heavenly joys  
The Glories of the Place  
Where Jesus sheds his brightest beams  
Of his o'er-flowing Grace!

*(Marshall and Todd, English Congregational  
Hymns, 36)*

**John Gill** (1697–1771), Strict Baptist minister and preacher, believed that the day of the Lord or “that day” receives frequent mention in scripture, including 1 Thess. 5:1, as well as 2 Pet. 3:10; 1 Cor. 1:8; 5:5; and other places. Christ’s “second coming and personal appearance is meant, which will be sudden” (*A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* 7.5.1c, 3). On the resurrection he goes beyond our text, claiming that “the resurrection of the just” is the “first” resurrection, which will occur at the coming of Christ; while the resurrection of the unjust “will be a thousand years” *after* the “first” resurrection (7.5). The coming of Christ in Revelation is made “visible, quick, and speedy” (7.5.1f). He will come “from the third heaven” (7.5.2a). Further, “Christ will come in the glory of his human nature” (7.5.4b). This seems to border on answering questions which cannot receive an answer. But when it comes to timing, Gill admits, “Of that day and hour knoweth no man” (Matt. 24:36; Acts 1:6–7; see 1 Thess. 5:1–3). The ungodly at the end “will be cast into the lake of fire, which burns with fire and brimstone” (7.5.7b).

**Jonathan Edwards** (1703–58) sheds light on Paul’s exhortation to build one another up (v. 11). He writes, “Let Christians help one another on going on this journey . . . Let them go . . . in a company, conversing together, and assisting one another . . . This would ensure a more successful travelling, and a more joyful meeting at their Father’s house in glory” (*Christian Pilgrim* 5.4).

## The Nineteenth Century

**Friedrich Schleiermacher** (1768–1834) devoted seven sections of *The Christian Faith* (1821, 2nd edn. 1832) to the last things, or “The Consummation of the Church” (sects. 157–63, pp. 696–722). He acknowledges that we can only “approximate” to these motions (696). His first comments on the coming of Christ are Christological: it shows “the union of the Divine essence with human nature in the Person of Christ” (sect. 158, p. 698). It also indicates “belief in the continued existence of personality after death” (698): “Belief in the survival of personality is bound up with faith in the Redeemer” (700). But an “exact construction” of the last events “is not to be thought of” (sect. 160, p. 706). In sect. 161 Schleiermacher sees the language of the Parousia as “figurative,” but also as more than this. We may speak of an interval between death and the Parousia, but “alike for those who first fall asleep and for the last, the interval is nil” (711). If this interval were conscious, it must involve “fellowship with Christ.”

On the resurrection and its relation to the coming of Christ, Schleiermacher considers different options. He asserts, rightly, “The organism must be adapted to the new conditions of life which are impending” (713). But this suggests to him problems about the last judgment. We cannot expect a depiction of events to be “definite.” Some kind of separation, or judgment on sin, is inevitable because “evils due to sin always spread over the entire common and corporate life”; hence believers can no longer be “involved in the same common life with unbelievers” (sect. 162.2; p. 715). Nevertheless we cannot state the idea of the last judgment “in a final form” (716). Schleiermacher sees believers in heaven “in a state of *unchangeable* ... blessedness” (sect. 163, p. 717), which may owe more to Plato than to the Bible. It suggests that “ideal” existence assumes a static, rather than dynamic, form. He rightly does not address the question of the timing of the Parousia. In his allusion to 1 Thess. 4:14–17 he is more interested in what Paul *omits* than in what he says (sect. 160.2; p. 708).

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) argues that Paul moves from the particular in 4:13–18 to the general in 5:1–11 (*Commentary*, 423). Paul is not blaming the readers for thinking that Christ’s coming is “too near,” but for their talk of “peace and safety,” rather than vigilance. The tendency to think that the Parousia was too near comes only in the Second Epistle. The simile in v. 2, “like a thief in the night” may be potentially offensive (424). We must qualify this with “nobler images.” Paul needs a sharp image to undermine the desire for “peace and security.” Hence he elaborates on the image of the pregnant woman (v. 3; 425). In vv. 4–6 light and darkness are further explored as metaphors (see John 3:19; 8:12; Rom. 2:19; 1 Cor. 16:13). Christians must be “awake and armed

for combat.” In vv. 9–11 Paul fastens on the hope of salvation. Hence the day of the Lord will not bring destruction for them, but blessing. He comments, “The election of grace by God is, no doubt, couched in the [Greek] *etheto* [destined]” (427). “Asleep” in v. 10 involves a lack of “complete self-consciousness [which] only comes in again with the resurrection of the body” (428).

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93) has a long note on “Belief in the Coming of Christ” (*Thessalonians*, 108–24). He acknowledges that this occurs in virtually every book of the Bible. But, he comments, “In our own day [1859] we find a dim and meagre shadow of the same primitive faith” (108). Some translate “passing feelings into a system of doctrinal truth” (108). When Paul wrote, “such a belief was still living ... within the circle of the Church” (109). Yet even the earliest generation knew that “of that hour knows no one” (see 1 Thess. 5:1–3; 109). Like Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann, Jowett in the twentieth century gives the impression that “the course of events” in history contradicts the earliest theology of Paul (110). The message becomes “the end is not yet” (111). Jowett values the “images” of the end, but rejects “an intellectual theory” (113). Images speak of God. In Jowett’s era, the expectation of death has become more real for most than the return of Christ (115).

Whatever his beliefs, however, Jowett sets out what are distinctively Paul’s. He cites “waiting for the coming of the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:7–8); “the Day shall declare it” (1 Cor. 3:13); “Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes” (1 Cor. 4:5); “We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:9–10); “In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men” (Rom. 2:15–16); “The day is at hand” (Rom. 13:11–12); and many others (117–19). However, Paul “never claims infallibility” (120), and Paul was “in error” (120). Jowett belongs to his times. James P. Martin shows how rationalism and other factors led to “the methodological reduction of eschatology in the nineteenth century” (*Last Judgement in Protestant Theology*, 129–208). This included Schleiermacher (135–52), and by implication, Jowett. Yet on 1 Thess. 5:1–11 Jowett observes, “Many characteristics of St. Paul are crowded in this passage ... the subtle transition from the use of the metaphor of the day of the Lord to the moral lesson that they are to walk as children of the day (cf. Rom. 13:1–14) ... the imagery of v. 8 [Salvation] ... our identity with Christ” (*Thessalonians*, 96). The day of the Lord is what today we should call a polyvalent symbol: the day of the Lord in Joel, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the day of revelation (97).

**James Denney** (1856–1917) has a different evaluation. He agrees that “the Day of the Lord” carried a cumulative symbolism, including cosmic disturbance, a sifting process, sudden destruction, and the return of Christ (*Thessalonians*, 186–7). For Christians, earnest watchfulness is required.

**J. B. Lightfoot** (1828–89) declared in 1895, “The resemblance in this passage to ... Matt. 24:43, Luke 12:39 makes it probable that St. Paul is referring to the

very words of Christ” (*Notes on Epistles of St. Paul*, 71). “Day of the Lord” occurs frequently in the prophets to denote the decisive manifestation of God’s sovereignty and often the day of judgment (Isa. 2:12; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 7:10; Joel 2:31). Verse 3 suggests affirmation of the apocalyptic discourse in Luke. Lightfoot further observes, “The Apostle’s way of dealing with metaphors may be seen still further illustrated by the different lights in which *hēmera* (day) is presented here, and by the double figurative application of *grēgorein*, *katheudein* (to wake, to sleep), first to the spiritually watchful and careless in v. 6, and then to the physically living and the dead in v. 10” (73). If Christ is the light of the world, Christians are sons of light (74). Like Calvin, Lightfoot warns us against stressing individual weapons, as in Eph. 6:13–17 (75).

# 1 Thessalonians

5:12–28

## Various Christian Duties and Closure

### Introduction and Overview

This closing passage readily divides into three: (1) an appeal to respect Christian leaders (5:12–13); (2) various duties, including admonishing idlers, supporting the weak, patience, nonretaliation, prayer, thanksgiving, and respecting prophecy (5:14–22); and (3) a prayer of blessing and closure (5:23–8). This last section includes the notorious reference to “your spirit and soul and body,” which has often been misunderstood, and has often been discussed since the church fathers.

The appeal for respect for Christian leaders finds several parallels in the New Testament, for example, in Heb. 13:17. It is noteworthy that an ecclesiological structure involving leaders emerged early in the development of Christianity. This is a development exclusive to the later epistles, for example Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles. However, Rom. 12:3–8 offers a parallel. Leaders work hard, caring and admonishing. In 1 Cor. 16:15 Stephanas and his people “have devoted themselves to the service of the saints,” and Paul urges the readers “to be subject to such” (16:16).

Ernest Best translates the Greek word *oligopsuchos* as *worried*, but F. F. Bruce translates it as *diffident* or *faint-hearted* (v. 14). It is the opposite of *megalopsuchos*, *self-confident* (Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 123). F. Danker suggests “faint-hearted” or “discouraged” (Danker, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 703). Most Christian duties are enjoined in the second person plural, but Paul uses the third person in “Let no one pay back evil with evil,” perhaps because he quotes a well-known aphorism (v. 15). The exhortation to prayer may come from an early Christian catechism (v. 17). In vv. 18–21 six imperatives follow: give thanks; do not quench ...; do not despise ...; test ...; hold fast ... abstain.” Prophecy must be treated seriously, but it must also be tested. If, as T. W. Gillespie and others argue, prophecy includes pastoral and applied preaching, the twenty-first century usually provides little scope for such testing (Gillespie, *First Theologians*; see also Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 956–79, 1087–98). Prophecy reveals the mind of God, but whether in the form of a sermon or in short staccato utterances remains open to debate. 1 Cor. 14:4, 24 suggests that it is a gospel message, not a communication concerning individual people.

The third section contains the well-known reference to “spirit and soul and body” (v. 23). Some have mistakenly thought that this refers to components of the human person. But they more probably denote modes of being, or aspects, or even metaphors for wholeness, as when we say, “Put your heart and soul into it.” As many church fathers recognized, it does not denote what theologians sometimes called a “trichotomous” view of human nature, but the whole person through and through. The early fathers refer to “the holy kiss,” but this greeting perhaps lapsed as men and women began to worship together (see Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12). The command to read this epistle to all (v. 27) is surprisingly in the singular. This may have been addressed to a designated reader.

## The Patristic Era

**Clement of Rome** (fl. 96) “Let us esteem those who have the rule over us,” while urging obedience to God (1 Clement 21:6; ANF 1.11; Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 1.47). **Ignatius** (c. 35–107) declares, “Give yourself to prayer without

ceasing” (*Epistle to Polycarp* 1.3; ANF 1.93; Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 269). **Polycarp** (c. 69–c. 155), who provided a bridge from the apostolic age to Irenaeus, quotes 1 Thess. 5:22, “Abstain from every form of evil” (*Epistle* 11.1; ANF 1.35; Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 297). **Hermas** (2nd century) transmits “visions” conveyed by an angel in the form of a shepherd, but is generally included among the apostolic fathers. He urges, “Instruct each other, therefore, and be at peace among yourselves” (see 1 Thess. 5:13; *Shepherd of Hermas* 1.9; ANF 2.16). It is predictable, given Hermas’ love of “prophecy,” that he should quote 5:20, “Woe to those who hear these words, and despise them [prophets]” (1:2; ANF 2.18).

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) quotes 1 Thess. 5:13–15, 19–22 in full, from “Be at peace among yourselves” (v. 13b) through “Support the weak” (v. 14) and “Let none repay evil for evil” (v. 15) to “Abstain from every form of evil” (v. 22). He has just quoted, “If we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). The whole chapter concerns “continuing,” or “perseverance,” in the Christian life (*The Instructor* 3.12; ANF 2.294).

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) also notes the prohibitions, “Quench not the Spirit” and “Do not despise prophecy” (*Against Marcion* 5.15; ANF 3.462). His late espousal of Montanism may relate to this. He is commenting on passages from 1 Thessalonians, especially its exhortation to purity. He quotes Paul’s prayer that “spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord and Saviour Christ” (v. 23), and comments that “soul” and “body” are “separate things.” But elsewhere he speaks of “the integrity of the whole substance” of humans (*On the Resurrection* 17; ANF 3.590). He quotes v. 23 in full again, on “body, soul and spirit,” commenting, “Here you have the entire substance of man destined to salvation.” He recognizes that “body” shares fully in the resurrection (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 47; ANF 3.581). He further declares, “Nothing can rise, except flesh and spirit, sole and pure” (v. 23; *On the Apparel of Women* 2.7; ANF 4.22). Tertullian also speaks of “the holy kiss” which must be joined with reconciliation for prayer to be effective (*On Prayer* 18; ANF 3.686; see 5:26). He repeats Paul’s phrase “pray at every time and in every place” (see v. 17; *On Prayer* 23; ANF 3.689). Tertullian cites the aphorism, “support the weak” (*De Fuga in Persecutione* 9; ANF 4.121). But we cannot do this, he says, when we flee. Tertullian also cites, “Let none render evil for evil” (*On Exhortation to Chastity* 6; ANF 4.54). The gospel forbids many things, including retaliation.

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) uses the notorious v. 23 for a purpose which is far from the text. The allusion to body, soul, and spirit, is part of Origen’s supposed justification for finding a *bodily* (historical or “literal”) meaning in a biblical text, as well as a *moral* meaning (corresponding with the soul) and a “*spiritual*” meaning for the spirit. He uses this distinction when he compares historical

Israel (“Israel after the flesh”) with “spiritual Israel” in Rom. 9:6, 8; 1 Cor. 10:18 (*On First Principles* 4.1.21; ANF 4.370; and 4.2.4). He insists that scripture is of God, not of human devising (*On First Principles* 4.1.6; see also Trigg, *Origen*, 120–9). He also quotes v. 23 again, this time in full, “May God sanctify you wholly ...” (*Commentary on Matthew* 13.2 and 14.3; ANF 10.475, 496). In book 13 he says that scripture knows the distinction between soul and spirit, but it is doubtful whether this is the point of the text. In 14.3 he discusses the harmony of body, soul, and spirit. Origen also draws from our passage the exhortation to “pray without ceasing” (v. 17; *Commentary on Matthew* 14.25; ANF 10.512).

**Gregory Thaumaturgus** (c. 213–c. 270) became a disciple of Origen, who had brought him to Christian faith, and miracles or wonders were attributed to him. In his written works he quotes 1 Thess. 5:16–18 in full, urging, with Paul, “Rejoice evermore: pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks” (*Four Homilies* 2; ANF 6.61). He is discussing the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, but the theme of rejoicing leads on to the other related exhortations.

**Athanasius** (c. 296–373) states that a person should “pray unceasingly” (v. 17; *Life of Antony* 3; NPNF2 4.196). He declares, “We pray without ceasing; in everything we give thanks” (*Letters* 2.7, 3.5; NPNF2 4.512, 515). In another Letter he quotes 1 Thess. 5:16–18, “Rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks” (*Letters* 11 [Easter 359]; NPNF2 4.537). These letters well accord with Paul’s concern for watchfulness, as well as for prayer and thanksgiving. Athanasius also quotes, “Quench not the Spirit,” not because the Spirit has come under human control, but because ingratitude, impurity, and unholy deeds are inimical to the Holy Spirit’s presence and work (*Letters* 4.4; NPNF2 4.514). Finally, he quotes v. 24, “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this” (*Four Discourses against the Arians* 2.10; NPNF2 4.353). Athanasius speaks of God’s faithfulness in performing his promises.

**Cyril of Jerusalem** (315–387) cites 1 Thess. 5:21–2, “Holding fast that which is good, abstaining from every form of evil” (*Catechetical Lectures* 6.36; NPNF2 7.43). He quotes v. 23, “The God of peace sanctify you wholly ... at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Catechetical Lectures* 23.23; NPNF2 7.157). The context, as we should expect, reminds us of a catechism, marking off “the way of salvation” (6.36) from worldly conduct, and offering a post-communion blessing (23.23).

**Gregory of Nazianzus** (c. 329–389/90) likewise quotes phrases of 1 Thess. 5:12–28, including “giving thanks for all things” (v. 18; *Oration* 7.23; NPNF2 7.237); and “Quench not the Spirit” (*Theological Orations* 3.21; NPNF2 7.309). This latter was primarily on the human nature of Jesus Christ, but under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. **Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 330–395) also cites the complementary aphorism “prove all things” (*On the Making of Man* 20.1; NPNF2 5.410). The context is different, and concerns the gift of “discernment among Christians.”

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) alludes to the “double honour” to be given to presbyters in 1 Tim. 5:17. If presbyters minister spiritual things, he says, why should they be given material things? But the honor should be given “not out of fear, but out of love,” and this can benefit the giver also (*Commentarius*, 3.230; see *Commentaries*, 110). Ambrosiaster asserts that the mature and courageous and those well grounded in the faith should support those who are faint-hearted or fearful (231). The Spirit is quenched, Ambrosiaster explains, “by contradiction”; or when someone who discourses on the scriptures is not heard out patiently (*qui quasi scripturas revelet, non audiri patienter debere*, 232). This comment shows that in Ambrosiaster’s view interruption and discussion were prevalent, but also that “speaking in the Spirit,” or “prophecy” could take the form of biblical exposition. Some people, he asserts, manage to teach “contrary doctrines in the name of the apostles . . . so Paul warns us to test everything” (232). He implies that hermeneutics and testing are needed. Ambrosiaster compares 1 John 4:1, “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits,” and cites the example of the Montanist prophets. In v. 23 Ambrosiaster underlines the purity of the body, soul, and spirit. Each of these three is important, but he avoids dispersing into a “trichotomous” view of man, focusing on God’s activity. In v. 24, “God is faithful to his promises” (234).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) points out that doctors, rulers, and fathers, often seem stern to those for whom they care, but people ought to be thankful for their work. So it is with priests: sometimes they need to rebuke and reprove, yet priests deserve our thanks and respect (v. 12). Honor them, he says, not chiefly for what they say, but for what they do (see Matt. 23:2–3; see also Heb. 13:17; *Homilies on 1 Thessalonians* 10; NPNF1 13.366). Priests who live in luxury and self-indulgence, and who pursue commercial interests, do not deserve honor. But devoted and dedicated priests deserve esteem. “He who loves Christ . . . will love him [the priest]” (v. 13; *Homily* 10; NPNF1 13.367). A good priest will be like one who “opened heaven to thee” (v. 13). In v. 14 Paul exhorts the church to admonish “the disorderly” or idlers, and to support the faint-hearted. Chrysostom observes, “It is necessary by admonition to render the medicine sweet” (*Homily* 10). Paul also rebukes sloth. We must not allow the weak member to perish.

On v. 15, Chrysostom observes, “If we ought not to render evil for evil, much less evil for good; much less, when evil has not been previously done, to render evil” (*Homily* 10; NPNF1 13.367). Rejoice, he says, even in the midst of temptations. On vv. 17–18, he comments, “Give thanks to God, and the evil is changed into good.” Temptation to take revenge is like the bee that stings, only then to die: “by that animal God instructs us not to grieve our neighbor” (*Homily* 10; 368). The fiercest beasts seek to inflict harm, even when no one has injured them. But a rational man knows not to imitate them (see 1 Cor. 6:7–8,

“Why not, rather, suffer wrong?”). Chrysostom also attacks greed: “How long shall we love riches? ... What is the good of gold?” (368). Magnificent houses may be “the memorial of your covetousness” (369).

In *Homily 11* Chrysostom comments that quenching the Spirit (v. 19) is like casting “water and dust upon the light of our lamp,” which is also the effect of an impure life (*Homily 11*; NPNF1 13.370). Our mouth can be like a door, which needs to be shut; and lack of giving alms may also quench spirit. Quenching the light paves the way for evil deeds. But to test prophecy (v. 20) is like the command in 1 Cor. 12:10 to discern the spirits (371). The false letter of 2 Thess. 2:2 proves its necessity: “Distinguish the true ... from the false.” On v. 23, Chrysostom rightly stresses the wholeness and integrity of the human person. Paul’s appeal to God’s faithfulness shows his humility, for “Think not,” he says, “that this happens from my prayers,” but from God’s purpose (372). Paul’s request for the readers’ prayers is yet a further sign of his humility (v. 25). The holy kiss expresses “the fire of love” between Christians (v. 26). May the grace of Christ (v. 28), he concludes, be especially with the poor and disabled, for “through them Christ comes, not through the rich” (374).

**John Cassian** (c. 360–after 430) comments on “pray without ceasing” (v. 17). Three things, he says, make the heart steadfast: watchings, meditation, and prayer. He who prays only at times when he bends his knees, prays too little. He who prays on bended knees, but is distracted by all kinds of wanderings of heart, does not really pray at all. “The mind ... while it is praying will be either transported to things heavenly, or dragged down to earthly things by those thoughts in which it had been lingering before prayer” (*The Second Conference of Abbot Isaac 12*; NPNF2 11.409).

**Augustine** (354–430) writes to maintain church discipline with “a kind of healing chastisement ... the severity of love,” quoting 1 Thess. 5:14–15: “Warn them that are unruly ... be patient with all” (*The Letters of Petilian the Donatist 3.4*; NPNF1 4.598). He cites the same verses in *The City of God 15.16* (NPNF1 2.287), with the addition of “See that none render evil for evil to anyone” (v. 15). Here he speaks of the need for stronger members of the heavenly city to strengthen and support the weaker, and if necessary, to restore the weak to faith (Gal. 6:1). He also quotes v. 19, “Quench not the Spirit” in the course of his exposition of the Psalms. Explanatory expositions, he asserts, are like bringing a lantern to give explanation and joy in the darkness, hence we should guard against quenching the Spirit (*On the Psalms*, Ps. 77 (76):4; NPNF1 8.361). Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom, and Augustine all place “the Spirit” (i.e., “prophecy”) in the context of *expounding scripture*, not of giving an impromptu “message” to a member of the congregation. In v. 23 Augustine does call “spirit” a person’s “separate part,” but does not try to use the text for a trichotomous view of human nature (*On the Soul and Its Origin 4.17* (12); NPNF1 5.361).

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) comments that teachers must be accorded respect. “Those who preside over you” includes those who lead in prayer (*Letters*, 2.120). They must receive “the highest honour, offered with sincere affection.” “The disorderly” means “those addicted to idleness,” perhaps in view of a mistaken sense of the immediacy of the coming of Christ. “Prayer without ceasing” (v. 17) is “not impossible; for it is easy when dining to sing God’s praises, and when on a journey to ask for divine help” (120). It is possible that some quenched the spirit of prophecy (vv. 19–20) because there were bogus prophets, who led people astray (121). The answer is not to extinguish them, but to put everything to the test (v. 21).

## The Medieval Era

**Bede the Venerable** (c. 673–735) largely derives his comments from Augustine in 1 Thess. 5:14–15, “Admonish the restless ... let no one repay evil for evil.” It is tempting, he admits, to run away from a problem and not to admonish those who fall: “Why are they afraid? Because they are hirelings” (*Excerpts from the Works of St. Augustine*, 287). They fear that the person “will take the admonition badly,” so they withhold the helpful admonition. But those who give warnings must do it with love, and follow the warning with encouragement. “Quench not the Spirit” (v. 19) does not mean “that he can be quenched, but as far as it is in their power, they are rightly called his quenchers, who act as if they want him quenched” (288).

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) stresses that Christian leaders are worthy of honor when they correct you (vv. 12–13). Those who are undisciplined must be admonished (*Opera Omnia*, PL 112/6, 561). Retaliation for evil (*reddet and retribui*) must be avoided, but we must do good (v. 15). He cites Augustine, as Bede does, about a good shepherd’s not being afraid of rebuking evil (John 10:1–10; 562). “Always rejoice” (v. 15) excludes being sad when sad things occur, just as nothing is to interrupt prayer “without ceasing,” as God wills (v. 17). We ought to pray in every place (1 Tim. 2:8). Rabanus again quotes Augustine on “Quench not the Spirit” (563). The Holy Spirit will sanctify you wholly (v. 23; 564). This offers another reason for not quenching the Spirit. Romans 12 offers a parallel: be ardent in the Spirit (12:11); rejoice in hope (12:12); “bless those who persecute you ... Do not repay evil for evil (12:14, 17); live peaceably with all (12:18).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) writes, “Those who are subject to bishops owe them, first, the acknowledgement of blessings; secondly, charity; and thirdly, peace” (vv. 12–13; *Commentary*, 47). Like others, he compares Heb. 13:7. In v. 14 they are to admonish the idle (48). Any who repay evil for evil “ought to be corrected” (49). “Faint-hearted” means fear of failing, and such ought to

be encouraged (see Isa. 35:4; Job 4:4). Aquinas notes Rom. 15:1, “We who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak.” On v. 14c, he comments that a bishop must guard against impatience. A person should be “slow to anger” (Prov. 19:11). To seek revenge is “mean” (50; v. 15). We must “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). To rejoice “*always*” (v. 16) is to rejoice “whatever evil might occur” (50). To pray *always* (v. 17) comes about in three ways: first, by observing set hours of prayer; second, by seeing that “prayer is the unfolding or expression of desire,” and hence is relevant whenever we desire anything; third, by giving alms as also an expression of prayer (*Commentary*, 51). Likewise, thanks are to be uninterrupted (v. 18). We must “abound in thanksgiving” (Col. 2:7). Like Augustine, Aquinas insists that the Spirit “cannot be extinguished,” but people may impede his work (Acts 7:51). The most extreme way of doing this is by “mortal sin” (51), but we may also conceal him by not using his gifts (52). “Prophesying” (v. 19) “may be understood as divine doctrine,” for “those who explain divine doctrine are called prophets ... Do not despise ... preachers” (52). This coheres with a view of prophecy as pastoral preaching. Testing is needed, however (v. 21). “Do not believe every spirit” (1 John 4:1). Paul then interjects a prayer (v. 23), not a treatise on human nature. He intercedes for the sanctification of the whole person (*Commentary*, 53). Aquinas explicitly rejects the notion that Paul alludes to separate “elements” in a person which perform different “functions.” All three terms, however, are “involved in sin”: reason, the sensitive appetite, and bodily functions. Paul prays that these may be free from sin.

Aquinas asserts, “It is not in man’s power to stop the Spirit” (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 189, art. 1; reply to obj. 4; 1 Thess. 5:19). He is discussing the ordered nature of doctrine, and entrance into the religious life. Earlier, he has a long section on prayer, in which he cites 1 Thess. 5:17, “Pray without ceasing,” repeating the three points made above (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 83, art. 14, reply to obj. 4). He has two references to “Prove all things” (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 189, art. 9, reply to obj. 1; art. 10, reply to obj. 1). Article 10 is on the need to take counsel with many, and to deliberate, before a major decision. Article 9 also advocates a time of probation before taking a final step. Aquinas comments on rendering evil for evil (v. 22) in discussing what he calls “scandal.” He translates it here as “all appearance of evil” (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 43, art. 1, reply to obj. 2; see art. 4 on “mortal sin”).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Desiderius Erasmus** (c. 1467–1536) has several references to 1 Thess. 5:12–28. On v. 14 he argues that love or faith “does not simply consist in being frequently in church, in prostrating oneself before the signs of the saints, in burning tapers,

in repeating ... prayers. God has no need of this" (*Enchiridion*, in Spinka (ed.), *Advocates of Reform*, 345). Paul defines love as edifying one's neighbor, leading all to become members of the same body, "to rebuke the erring, to teach the ignorant, to lift up the fallen, to console the downhearted ... to support the needy" (345). Christians are "to pray without ceasing" (v. 17), since prayer and knowledge are their weapons (302). On v. 21, however, he calls body, soul, and spirit "the three parts of man" (318–19), and appeals to Origen, his main authority, for this view. He states, "The Spirit renders us gods; the flesh, animals; the soul makes us men. The spirit makes us pious, the flesh impious; the soul, neither" (319).

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546), surprisingly, uses 1 Thess. 5:23, like Erasmus, to argue for a trichotomous view of human nature. He is expounding Heb. 4:12, "The word of God is living and powerful ... piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit." He is usually on the watch for metaphor, but here he says, "The Apostle ... describes man as existing in three parts, when he says ... 'Your whole spirit and soul and body' (5:23)." He also cites 1 Cor. 14:15, "sing with the spirit ..." (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Early Theological Works*, 96). Later on in the same epistle (Heb. 9:5) he asserts, "These divisions correspond to the celebrated threefold division of man by Paul into soul, body, and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23)" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Early Works*, 158).

Luther also refers to 1 Thess. 5:14 on comfort. He writes to Matthias Weller when Weller was organist of Freiberg Cathedral in 1534 to urge him to use his music to "comfort the faint-hearted" (v. 14), just as Isaiah proclaimed comfort (Isa. 40:8–9), or "to serve the Lord with gladness" (Deut. 28:47). He declares, "Rejoice in Christ ... let him bear your burdens, for he assuredly cares for you ... Begin striking the keys, and singing in accompaniment ... until your sad thoughts vanish ... Rap the devil on the nose" (*Letter to Matthias Weller*, in *Letters*, 96–7). A year later he replies to his friend Peter Beskendorf about how best to pray. He quotes v. 17, "Pray without ceasing," arguing that this matches Christ's words in Luke 11:8–13. If one fears God, one will wish to do this: "Do not grow away from true prayer," but pray as one who relies on God's gracious promise, in the name of Christ (*Letters*, 126; see also 124–5).

Luther has an interesting translation of "abstain from all forms of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22). He renders the Greek *eidous ponērou* as "all demeanour which is evil," to attack the papacy and Church of Rome, for a "worldly and ostentatious style" in contrast to "the lowly Christ or St. Peter" (*An Appeal to the Ruling Class* [1520], in *Selections*, 416). In this treatise he condemns nobles and the papacy for "the wicked and scandalous appearance about which St. Paul says, 'Abstain from every form and appearance of evil' (1 Thess. 5:22)." This includes benefices, trading companies, and everywhere where there is a show of excess (482).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) considers the appeal to respect “godly teachers” (v. 12) to be “a very necessary warning” (*Commentary*, 55). They are too often not honored as they should be. Respect for them is a matter of honoring *the Lord*. Paul speaks of their working hard; thereby “all idle people are excluded from the rank of true pastors” (56). He comments, “The excellence and dignity of this work are inestimable.” But the church needs to distinguish “true and faithful pastors” from unfaithful ones. Like kings and magistrates, they are “over you.” Faithfulness entails “pure doctrine” (56). Those who are idle should receive “a sharp reproof, so they may return to the correct path” (57).

“The timid” must be helped; they have a “broken spirit,” and need kindness (v. 14). Patience requires “a degree of leniency” with everyone. Not to pay back wrong for wrong requires “special care” (58). To suffer patiently is “unique to Christians.” “No one” extends to all: “revenge is forbidden in every case” (58). But the negative prohibition is coupled with positive urging “to do good” (v. 15; see also Rom. 12:21). “Be joyful” (v. 16) includes being calm under adversity. A calm mind and Christian joy is enjoined in Phil. 4:4–6. Unceasing prayer and thanks (vv. 17–18) contribute to it: “He wants us to hold God’s blessings in high esteem” (59). We must consider what Christ has done for us. But when we pray, we should not grumble if we do not immediately receive what we have prayed for. It is God’s will that we “see how God views us in Christ” (59).

The Holy Spirit illuminates our understanding. Hence we should not seek to “put out” his fire (v. 19). Calvin views “prophecy” (v. 20) as only one particular example of the general reference to the Spirit in v. 19. He comments, “I do not include the gift of foretelling the future ... ‘Prophecies’ means the art of *interpreting Scripture*; a prophet is an interpreter of the will of God ... Prophetic teaching is for edification, exhortation, and consolation” (60, my emphasis). In 1 Thess. 5:20 it means “*the interpretation of Scripture properly applied to the people present*” (60, my emphasis). “This remarkable statement commends preaching” (61). Satan, by contrast, “whispers in their [the false prophets’] ears ... as if it were a secret revelation from the Spirit” (61). Because rash people “often pass off their trifles under the name of prophecy,” such claims must be tested (v. 21). These “worthless words” may even set people against preaching. Christians should not “welcome uncritically every word they hear that it spoken in God’s name” (61). We must retain discernment between true and false. But before we can test something, “we must first of all listen to it” (62).

In v. 22 “form of evil” means “appearance” of evil. In this context it specifically means “false teaching that has not yet been exposed ... as though it is really evil” (62). The Spirit has brought truth and goodness to light. “Testing” saves us “from accepting anything too readily” (63). After these exhortations, Paul moves to prayer (vv. 23–8). In v. 23 he prays for the renewal of the whole person. “Spirit, soul and body” merely show what the “whole” person is. But Calvin

does also speak of “the constituent parts of a man” (63). Scripture, he comments, uses these terms in different ways (64). Thoughts and affections form part of a person’s wholeness. God has called and adopted the readers; hence, because he is faithful (v. 24) “his grace will always continue.” Paul charges them to read his letter (v. 27), because he feared that “spiteful and envious people would suppress this letter” (64). God wanted Paul’s ministry to be known throughout the church (65).

Calvin’s *Institutes* give a different account of some verses in our passage. “Quench not the Spirit” (5:19) is understood as a warning against sloth, which does not seem to feature in the *Commentary* (*Institutes* 2.5.11; tr. Beveridge, 1.284). On “prophets,” Calvin insists that “none such now exist, or they are less manifest” (*Institutes* 4.3.4; tr. Beveridge, 2.319). In the Old Testament prophets sought to reconcile man with God (*Institutes* 1.6.2; tr. Beveridge, 1.66). In vv. 19–20, Calvin observes, Paul “does not carry them aloft with speculation apart from the word ... They are daily invited to the hearing of the Word” (i.e., *scripture*; *Institutes* 1.9.3; tr. Beveridge, 1.86). Calvin notes that prayer and thanksgiving must be “without ceasing” (vv. 17–18; *Institutes* 3.20.28; tr. Beveridge, 2.178). On the notorious v. 23, he understands it to emphasize the importance of the *body* for Christians (*Institutes* 3.25.7; tr. Beveridge, 2.268).

**Estius** (1542–1613), following many others, compares a reference to 1 Tim. 5:17, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour” (*Commentarius*, 2.588). Christians are to give to prelates “obedience and reverence.” He compares the so-called “heretical” outlook of John Wycliffe (588–9). The difference between a Catholic and Protestant reception of this verse becomes evident. In v. 14 the “restless” or “idle” (Estius uses three words, *inquieti*, *otiosi*, and *inordinate*) distrust the peace and tranquility which should characterize the Christian community (589). The timid (*pusillanimis*) should be encouraged (v. 14). Retaliation is forbidden (v. 15; 590). On “unceasing prayer” (v. 17), Estius appeals to Luke 18:1–8 (the importunate widow). On “quench not the Spirit” (v. 19) he appeals to Augustine and Chrysostom on the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12). People may try to extinguish the Spirit, but the Spirit works in many places. “Prophecy” (v. 20) does not mean “private revelation” (592). Paul’s command to “test everything” (v. 21) applies most of all to prophecy.

**Richard Hooker** (c. 1554–1600) wrote mostly on ecclesiology. Reflecting 1 Thess. 5:12–13, he comments, “The ministry is an office of dignity and honour” (*Ecclesiastical Polity* 5.77.9). It is understandable that such an office should not be sought, he admits. But “power ... of ecclesiastical order may be desired” (5.77.10). Touching the ministry, he observes, “I would rather term the one sort Presbyters than Priests, because in matter of so small moment I would not willingly offend their ears, to whom the name of Priesthood is odious,

though without cause” (5.78.2). He adds, “Priest ... offereth sacrifice to God.” But on the other hand, because of developments in the English language, “The word *Priest* hath his right place ... seeing then that sacrifice is now no part of the church ministry” (5.78.2). Hooker adds, “Let them use what dialect they will, whether we call it a Priesthood, a Presbytership, or a Ministry ... although in truth the word *Presbyter* doth seem more fit” (5.78.3).

After King Charles I was defeated by Oliver Cromwell and his model army, and surrendered in 1646, **John Milton** (1608–74) wrote the following:

Because you have thrown off your Prelate Lord,  
And with stiff vows renounced his Liturgy ...,  
Men whose life, learning, faith, and pure intent,  
Would have been held in high esteem with Paul  
Must now be named and printed heretics ...  
That so the Parliament  
May with wholesome and preventive shears  
Clip your phylacteries, though baulk your ears,  
And succour our just fears,  
When they shall read this clearly in your charge:  
New *Presbyter* is but old Priest writ large.

(“On the New Forces of Conscience  
under the Long Parliament”)

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) attacks those who “seek the honour and profit of the office [of minister] and refuse the labour of it” (*Commentary*, 3.749). “Rule” signifies, he says, “superintendency and precedency, which the elders or ministers have.” Paul combines esteem and love. The work of ministers is honorable (vv. 12–13). The “unruly” may refer to those without a trade or a calling, those who intrude into other people’s business or who neglect their Christian duties (v. 14). Verse 15 is “directed to the guides of the church” (749). The verse is to be understood as “private revenge rising out of malice.” But Paul also positively urges that which is good to others (v. 15). Joy that arises from good circumstances is “common to men and beasts”; it stands in contrast to joy prompted by the Spirit in circumstances good and bad (750). “Quench not the Spirit” takes up the image of the Spirit as fire (v. 19). “Many had extraordinary gifts in primitive times,” including prophecy (v. 20). In contrast to Calvin, Poole thinks that “prophecy sometimes meant foretelling of things to come, and speaking by extraordinary revelation ... sometimes the Scriptures are so called” (751). “Prove all things” (v. 21) relates specifically to prophecy. Poole comments, “Men’s doctrines are to be judged by the Scriptures as the standard of truth.” “Evil” (v. 22) may range from “erroneous opinions” to “gross idolatry.” Verse 27 shows that Paul wrote this epistle “for public use” (753).

## The Eighteenth Century

**Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) concentrates on the pastoral office in vv. 12–13. Ministers are “to serve and honour the Lord ... to give good counsel, but also to warn the flock of dangers ... The people should honour and love their ministers.” A kind word, he says, “may do much good.” On vv. 16–22, he comments that, while not expecting to live for many years, we must rejoice in what God gives us: “We should rejoice more, if we prayed more.” We shall see cause to give thanks if we pray or give thanks concerning “all lawful business,” for “past and present, temporal and spiritual, mercies.” Even “chastisements and corrections” must be included. On “quench not the Spirit,” Henry asserts that all Christians are baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. He works as a fire, by “enlightening and purifying” Christian people. “Carnal lusts and affections” are like pouring water or heaping earth on a fire. Henry declares, like many others, “By prophesyings, here understand *the preaching of the word*, the interpreting and applying of the scriptures. We must not despise preaching ... We must search *the Scriptures*” (my emphases). He comments that we must be sanctified “more perfectly ... we press toward complete holiness” (v. 23), although at times we must fall. On Paul’s directive to read the epistle in public, Henry asserts, “The common people are allowed to read the Scriptures ... It is their duty ... [Scriptures] should not be kept in an unknown tongue ... should be read in all public congregations, for the benefit of the unlearned especially.”

**William Law** (1686–1761) asserts: “All practices that heighten and improve our true comprehension of God ... are to be reckoned so many helps and means, to fill us with devotion. As Prayer is the proper fuel of this holy flame, so we must ... give prayer its full power” (*A Serious Call*, ch. 14, p. 185). Singing is the proper use of a psalm, and is a suitable beginning of devotions (15, 186). Chanting or singing “create delight in God [and] awaken heavenly desires,” and are a means of “rejoicing in, and praising God.” “Singing is a natural effect of joy in the heart.” It unites soul and body. Many imagine, he says, “great devotion to be great bigotry,” but “love and gratitude to God must have the highest place amongst our highest virtues” (*A Serious Call*, ch. 24, pp. 341–2).

**John Gill** (1697–1771) argues that public ministry of the word is next in importance to baptism and the Lord’s supper. He states “The public ministry of the word is an ordinance of Christ” (*A Body of Practical Divinity* 3.3.1c). It is ordained to operate until the end time, when the church will become “a perfect man” or person. It is a good work (1 Tim. 3:1; 3.3.2), which is to be performed faithfully and completely (3.3.5). Those who labor in this way are worthy of “honourable respect; they are to be received with gladness ... to be acknowledged by those over whom they are as their fathers, guides, and

governors” (1 Cor. 16:10; Phil. 2:30; see 1 Thess. 5:12–13; *A Body of Practical Divinity* 3.3.2). Prayer must be rendered not simply by individual Christians, “but as bodies and communities, joining together in that [public] service” (Eph. 4:18; Phil. 4:6; 1 Thess. 5:17; *A Body of Practical Divinity* 3.5.5.1f). Paul seems to intend to refer here to “public prayer.” Justin and Tertullian witness to this. Further, “Prayer should always be accompanied with thanksgiving” (3.5.5.3f). Prayer, thanksgiving, rejoicing, and the work of the Spirit find common expression in singing praises to God (*A Body of Practical Divinity* 3.7.4d; see also 3.7.1–4, 5b3).

**John Wesley** (1703–1791) comments that some ministers may preach, administer, admonish, and govern, but sometimes two or three different people may perform these functions. They are to be respected (vv. 12–13). “Rejoice evermore” (v. 16) means “uninterrupted happiness in God” (*Notes on the New Testament*, 694). “In everything give thanks” (v. 18) is “Christian perfection.” Christ has purchased joy, as well as righteousness. We cannot cease to pray, any more than we cease to breathe. The Spirit “flames in holy love . . . Damp it not . . . by neglecting to do good, or by doing evil” (694). By “prophesyings,” Wesley comments, “*That is, preaching*, for the apostle is *not speaking of extraordinary gifts*” (694; my emphases).

## The Nineteenth Century

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) insists that although “nothing certain” can be known about pastoral office in the earliest years of the church, not all members stand “on a level”; some have a leadership role (*Commentary*, 428). Yet he adds, “How very far St. Paul is from hierarchical notions of the dignity of rulers” (430). The series of single exhortations in vv. 15–18 presuppose “the highest moral standing.” The first exhortation reflects the sermon on the mount, “Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44; see Rom. 12:17). The giving of thanks is “an expression of child-like dependence on God.” “Quench not the Spirit” (v. 19) alludes both to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and “a religious–moral principle” (431). This latter comment reflects a characteristic idealist, nineteenth-century view of “spirit,” probably owing more to Plato than to Paul. In v. 23, “Three parts of human nature [are] named. Each must be preserved entire” (433). “Trichotomy” characterizes many nineteenth-century writers.

**James Denney** (1856–1917) writing in 1892, spreads the exposition of 1 Thess. 5:12–28 over 66 pages (*Thessalonians*, 200–65). Paul implies a “constitution” in the reference to “those who labour among you.” But the young community appears in contrast to ecclesiological divisions today. Denney comments, “The best workers in a church are not always or necessarily found

among those who have official functions to perform” (203). “Those who labour,” he says, include those who teach children, and others. He declares, “The presidency was in the hands of a plurality of men.” But Denney writes as a minister of the United Free Church of Scotland. Elders, he claims, would literally have been elderly men. But “to admonish” does seem to imply an office. “Support the weak” does not mean “provide for them,” but encourage them not to flag or slip away (211–13). “Rejoice,” “pray,” and “give thanks” (vv. 16–18): Denney calls these the “standing orders” of the gospel. Prayer “is the primary mark of the Christian” (222). Thanksgiving is “a kind of joyful prayer” (225).

Denney likens a new experience of the Spirit to a flame which smokes. We should not avoid the smoke by pouring cold water on it, but “to let it burn itself clear” (236). Smoke can hurt the eyes, “but the smoke will soon pass by”; so it is with extreme fervor. It is “untaught and inexperienced . . . wonderfully blind”; but “it is . . . contagious” (236). Hence Paul says, “Quench not the Spirit” (v. 20; 237). Yet testing is needed: we think of the Montanists, “the heretical sects of the middle ages,” and some in “Independent” churches (238). Denney comments, “The prophet was a man . . . who possessed . . . the power of speaking edification, exhortation and comfort. In other words he was a Christian *preacher*, endued with wisdom, fervour, and tenderness” (239, my emphasis).

**J. B. Lightfoot** (1828–89) writes in his *Notes* (1895): “It is not in the moving of the lips, but in the elevation of the heart to God that the essence of prayer consists” (81). Amid ordinary duties, therefore, it is still possible to pray (v. 12). Some express surprise that Paul would say “Quench not the Spirit” (v. 19) in his earliest epistle. But Lightfoot comments, “On the contrary, much more danger might reasonably be apprehended from an unchastened enthusiasm in the first flush of their devotion to the Gospel” (82). Paul wants to check an overreaction. On “prophet” (v. 20), he observes, “In the New Testament the notion of foretelling is kept in the background, rarely appearing (as Acts 11:28, of Agabus)” (83). He alludes to Taylor’s *Liberty of Prophesying* as a source of information on various interpretations of the term (84). Yet “prophecy” must be tested (v. 21). He speaks of v. 23 as “a threefold division” of human nature (88). Biblical scholars today would be cautious about the word “division.” The emphasis in v. 27 arises from a suspicion that “a wrong use might be made of his [Paul’s] name and authority” (91).



# 2 Thessalonians



# 2 Thessalonians

## 1:1–4

## Address, Greetings, and Thanksgiving

### Introduction and Overview

The address in v. 1 is identical to that in 1 Thess. 1:1. Verse 2a is almost identical, but it is more explicit. Grace comes from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 2). In both epistles God and Christ are closely associated, which is remarkable in such an early development of Christology (see Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*). Like 1 Thessalonians, this letter appears to come from three people: Paul and his co-workers Silvanus (or Silas) and Timothy. (But please see the extended discussion of the authorship, especially in the nineteenth century, in

the Introduction). We noted that during the last 20 years many in biblical studies have emphasized Paul's collaborative ministry with his co-workers. He is no individualist freelance. Frequently "we" and "us" are not merely an epistolary device, but represent a genuine plural (1:3–4, 11; 2:1, 13; 3:1, 4, 6, 7, 11, 14).

The thanksgiving (v. 3) also reflects similarities with 1 Thess. 1:2–3, except for the phrase "we *must*" give thanks (and you all). This may be largely because Paul now thanks God for a specific answer to prayer in 1 Thess. 3:12. Paul's thanksgiving is also broadly similar to Rom. 1:8–10 and 1 Cor. 1:4–9 (see 2 Cor. 1:3–8 and Phil. 1:3–6). Although, therefore, thanksgiving is a convention in Greco-Roman letter-writing, this expresses genuine thanks to God. Paul adds "brothers," or "brothers and sisters" (NRSV), which witnesses to his enormous affection for the readers as friends and fellow Christians. Both epistles have been called "friendship letters," as we noted.

The faith and love of the readers has been a theme in 1 Thessalonians. Here Paul emphasizes that the readers' faith and love "are growing abundantly" (v. 3). He adds the theme of their firm faith in the face of persecutions and afflictions (v. 4). Some see these two terms as synonymous; but "afflictions" (Greek, *thlipsis*) may indicate a distinctively eschatological stance of affliction and glory. These two terms combine to mean "outward pressure to conform" (Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 191). But they may refer to more than this in the face the pressures of the imperial cult at Thessalonica. In view of the readers showing such increase in faith and love in the face of trials, Paul "boasts" of the readers (v. 4). This offers a further advance on 1 Thessalonians, largely in the light of Timothy's excellent report (1 Thess. 3:6–13). It is what we should expect of an affectionate pastor and friend.

## The Subapostolic and Patristic Eras

**Clement of Rome** (c. 96) observes, "We ... are not justified by ourselves ... but by that *faith* through which, from the beginning" (*1 Clement* 32; ANF 1.13). This balances a more ambiguous reference to faith in Clement's allusion to Rahab's "faith and hospitality" in *1 Clement* 12 (ANF 1.8). Paul means more than the faith that belongs to justification. A deeper and more active faith appears in the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus* 10 (c. 130; ANF 1.29), where it is paired with love as a source of blessings. **Ignatius** (c. 35–107) urges faith and love, commenting "The beginning is faith, and the end is love. Now these two, inseparably connected together, are of God" (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 14; ANF 1.55). Probably the closest reference to 2 Thess. 1:3 comes in Ignatius' thanksgiving to God for the faith of the church in Smyrna. He gives thanks to God that they have "an unmoveable faith, as if you were nailed to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ ... and are established in love

through the blood of Christ (*Epistle to Smyrna* 1.1; ANF 1.86). Paul also adds, “in our Lord Jesus Christ,” when he gives thanks.

**Irenaeus** (c. 130–c. 200) has an embryonic form of the first ecumenical creed, where he refers to “this faith” as the apostolic tradition (*Against Heresies* 1.10.1–2; ANF 1.330–1). Paul includes the notion of holding fast to the apostolic tradition, but it also includes trust and faithfulness. In the sense of “trust,” Irenaeus later compares Christian faith with that of Abraham: “Our faith was also pre-figured in Abraham ... as Abraham believed God ... They which are of faith are the children of Abraham” (*Against Heresies* 4.21.1; ANF 1.492). But he does not allude explicitly to 2 Thess. 2:1–4.

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) provides the first direct allusion to 2 Thess. 1:4–5. He writes of his readers “having patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations, in which you endure a manifestation of the righteous judgement of God, that you may be accounted worthy of his kingdom, for which you are suffering” (*Scorpiace, or Antidote to the Scorpion’s Sting* 13; ANF 3.643, probably c. 205). He notes that Paul speaks in favor of martyrdom, in 2 Thessalonians 1 and in Romans 5. Tertullian also wrote a short treatise *On Prayer* in which he discusses immediate access to God, partly on the basis of the Lord’s Prayer (*On Prayer* 2–3; ANF 3.682).

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) does not seem to refer to 2 Thess. 1:1–4 in his extant writings, but he writes on prayer, and includes abundant examples of his prayers. He comments: “*Prayer* is something nobler [i.e., than supplication alone] offered by a person with praise ..., while *thanksgiving* is a statement of gratitude made with prayer for receiving good things from God either when it is a great thing that is received or ... when the benefit ... appears only to the one who has benefited” (*On Prayer* 14.2, in *Origen*, 109; emphasis original). He suggests the sequence: praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and finds an example of thanksgiving in 2 Sam. 7:18–22 (LXX) (*On Prayer* 33.1, 3). Origen also writes elsewhere, “To give thanks to God is to offer him a sacrifice of praise ... This ... is the same faith which is proclaimed ... in all the world” (*Commentarii in Epistolas B. Pauli, Ad Romanos*). Examples of his praying can be found in other writings.

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) comments on 2 Thess. 1:1 that this verse conveys no merely conventional greeting, but constitutes “solemn words” conveying Paul’s wish-prayer of “grace and peace from God” to the readers (*Commentarius*, 3.235). The epistle is also written in the name of Paul, Silas, and Timothy. He further notes, “We ought to give thanks” (v. 3) because the readers are in a better situation than when he wrote the First Epistle. Indeed their patience and faith under their persecutions and afflictions are exemplary (v. 4; 236). **Ambrose of Milan** (c. 338–397) quotes 2 Thess. 1:1 in full, but for a quite different purpose from our text. He is opposing the heretical use of “in God the Father” to criticize the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Ambrose and

the Cappadocian fathers often argue that the “Trinity” is implied in Paul (Ambrose, *On the Holy Spirit* 2.8.76; NPNF2 10.124).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) notes that Paul says elsewhere of Timothy, one of the three co-senders, “I have no one like-minded who will care truly for your state” (Phil. 2:20; Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Thessalonians* 1; NPNF1 13.323). On the greeting “grace,” he observes, “How great must it be to find favour with God” (*Homily 2 on 2 Thessalonians*; NPNF1 13.380). He illustrates grace to the undeserving from the story of Joseph’s promotion, and from Paul in Rom. 5:10, “If, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God . . .” Paul’s statement, “We are bound to give thanks,” is “a sign of great humility” (*Homily 2*; 380).

Chrysostom asserts that faith increases (v. 3) “when we suffer something dreadful for it . . . when the winds assail us, when the rain’s burst upon us . . . [and] we are not shaken.” He also notes the readers’ love for one another. But love must not simply be shown within *cliques* of three or four: “Love . . . ought to be extended to the whole Church of God” (*Homily 2*; 381). Love among three or four can lead to exclusive divisions, but God has commanded love to *all*, even to enemies. Hence the writers thank God for the readers, and “glory” in them (v. 4). Since they have shown *patience*, Chrysostom suggests, a longer period than *days* must have elapsed since the writing of 1 Thessalonians.

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) argues that in spite of Paul’s praise, the readers still needed God’s grace. Paul has said that their faith increases, and love abounds, but they still face trials (*In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, 2.43). Hence, “In every place we glory about you concerning your firmness of faith,” while you face persecution, torture, or the rack (*tormenta*, 44). **Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430) quotes 2 Thess. 1:1–4, and comments on the readers’ patience or longsuffering (*patientia*) under all persecutions and constraints (*Expositions*, 439–40).

**Augustine** (354–430) cites, “We are bound to thank you, brothers, as is meet . . .” (2 Thess. 1:3) in the context of arguing that we would not have faith and love unless God had loved us first, and chosen us in Christ (Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will* 38; NPNF1 5.460). He comments similarly on 1 Thess. 3:12. If God’s grace is the source of increasing faith and abounding love, Paul writes that he ought to give thanks to God for this, rather than praising the readers, “as if you possessed these gifts of yourselves” (28; 460).

## The Medieval Period

**Gregory the Great** (c. 540–604) is the first great administrator and writer of the medieval period. His world is that of medieval thought. In his *Liber Regulae*, part III, he turns to the topic *The Ruler Ought to Teach and to Admonish Those under Him*. In ch. 8, adm. 9, on “How the Forward are to be

Admonished,” he quotes the whole of 2 Thess. 1:3–4, and comments that although he praises his readers for their increasing faith and love, Paul is about to refer to the awesome coming of Christ from heaven, for which they must become more worthy (Gregory, *Liber Regulae III The Ruler Ought to Teach* 8.9; NPNF2 12.296). It is almost as if 2 Thess. 1:3–4 is making the opposite point. Yet Gregory is perhaps saying that we should not be misled by his more optimistic and generous verdicts.

**Haimo of Auxere** (c. 810–c. 875) notes the similarity with 1 Thessalonians, and comments, “Faith needs to grow, as when the apostles say to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith’ (Luke 17:5)” (*Second Thessalonians*, 22). On “tribulations” (v. 4) Haimo observes, “Nothing happens in this world unless it is done or permitted by God” (22). Thus martyrs and other faithful people suffered many adversities and trials as “an example of the just judgement of God” (22). These constitute a sign that God loves them. The persecution of the martyrs and their enemies will receive severe recompense at the last day. Hence God’s judgment is “just,” because it falls equally on all.

**Thietland of Einsiedeln** (d. 965) arrived at the monastery of Einsiedeln in Swabia, modern eastern Switzerland, around 945. He became abbot c. 958, and wrote commentaries on several epistles, including 1 and 2 Thessalonians. He argues that 2 Thessalonians concerns the destruction of “the kingdom of the Romans,” the coming of the Antichrist, and the correction of those who idly dash through people’s homes. In 1:1 he notes collaboration with Silvanus and Timothy. He comments on the phrase “*must* give thanks”: “The Apostle shows that he is a debtor,” which he calls fitting (*Second Thessalonians*, 42). Immense gifts call for immense thanks. The Thessalonians have made progress since the First Epistle. Thus Paul takes pride in them and in their progress in faith and patience (v. 4). They are a glory from God.

**Bernard of Clairvaux** (1090–1153) writes of increase in love. He wrote on “degrees of love,” and on humility. Degrees of love confer liberation from self-centeredness. It has been said, “Charity (*caritas*) is at the heart of St. Bernard’s teaching; it explains all that he says about God and man. For God is love, the source of all love ... The degrees of love, humility, and liberty are parallel ... a continuous movement” (Leclercq et al., *A History of Christian Spirituality*, 2.359–60).

**Richard of St. Victor** (d. 1173) speaks of faith as a state and as an increasing process. He stresses, “We must not halt as soon as we reach the entrance itself, but must always be hastening ... to the deeper things ... and must press on with all zeal to the greatest diligence, so that by daily increases we may advance” (Richard, *On the Trinity* 3, in Fairweather (ed.) *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 325–6).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) wrote a commentary on 1 Thessalonians but not on 2 Thessalonians. We must therefore refer to scattered uses of the text in

*Summa Theologiae* and other writings. Thomas asks in what sense faith can increase (1:3, “Whether faith can be greater in one man than in another.” He considers three possible objections, and then responds: “On the contrary, wherever we find great and little, there we find more or less” (*Summa* 2.2, qu. 5, art. 4). In Matt. 14:31, Jesus says, “O thou of little faith”; and in Matt. 15:28, “O woman, great is thy faith.” One person may believe more things than another. Further, from the point of view of the subject, will may be combined with intellect; certainty may vary; or a firm habit of faith may become ingrained. “Capacity” plays a varied part (art. 4). Aquinas also devotes a question and eight articles to love. In *Summa* 2.2, qu. 23, he looks at “Charity, considered in itself,” and through articles 1–8 considers different aspects. It includes friendship (art. 1); is a virtue (art. 3), a “special virtue” (art. 4), and the most excellent of virtues (art. 6; 1 Cor. 13:13). Love is not simply an emotion, but involves both intellect and will (art. 8). Love is “the foundation or root” of all other virtues (art. 8, ad. 2). Moreover it is “a gift of God” (art. 7). Hence we have Thomas’s outlook on v. 3, “Your faith is growing abundantly” (*Summa* 2.2, qu. 5, art. 4) and on “the love of every one of you for one another is increasing” (2.2, qu. 23, arts. 1–8). *Love is an act of will, or it could not be commanded*, and faith can grow in the ways which Thomas elucidates.

Aquinas also considers the virtues of fortitude and martyrdom, which relate to the Thessalonians (v. 4). The readers endure persecutions and afflictions in such a way that Paul boasts of them. Thomas asserts, “Martyrdom is an act of fortitude,” as endurance is (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 124, art. 2). A martyr is “a witness to the faith,” despising “things present” (2.2, qu. 124, art. 4). Thomas quotes the beatitude: “Blessed are those who suffer persecution for justice’s sake” (Matt. 5:10; art. 5).

The **Beghards** and **Béguines** (13th century) owed much to Bernard, from Beatrice of Nazareth to William of Afflighem, and “The Seven Degrees of Love.” From the Béguine movement **Hadewijch of Antwerp** (13th century) is credited with writing:

Ah! dear Love, if any love I love,  
 ‘Tis Thee, my love.  
 Who givest grace for grace  
 The loved one to sustain.

Ah! sweet Love, I would that I were love,  
 And loved thee, Love, with love itself!  
 Ah! sweet Love, for love’s sake grant  
 That love may wholly know her love.

(Leclercq et al., *History of Christian Spirituality*, 2.361)

This stripping of the self in love for the other flows into love for others.

**Dante Alighieri** of Florence (1265–1321) observes in the last lines of the *Paradiso*:

Within its depth I saw ingathered,  
Bound by love in one volume,  
The scattered leaves of the universe ...  
By the love that moves the sun and the other stars.

For Dante, contemplation generates love, even in *The Divine Comedy*.

**Catherine of Siena** (c. 1347–80) sought to practice love of God and love of the neighbor in the context of a mystical faith. From a love touched by self-interest, she seeks a love that is pure and perfect, and that is part of the desire to grow in virtue. Love for God and love for the church, or for fellow Christians are inseparable. “For Catherine all was summed up in love and union with Christ crucified ... She preached love with all the ardour of the soul” (Leclercq et al., *History of Christian Spirituality*, 2.415–16).

**Nicholas of Cusa** (1401–64) continues the mystical tradition. He writes, “Two things only hast thou taught, O Saviour Christ – faith and love. By faith the intellect has access to the Word; by love ‘tis united thereto; the nearer it approaches, the more it waxes in power; the more it loves, the more it establishes itself in its light” (*On Learned Ignorance* 3.9.11, in Petry (ed.), *Late Mediaeval Mysticism*, 381).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) predictably writes on faith in his early commentary on Hebrews, especially on Heb. 11:6, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” This text was frequently quoted in scholastic debates on faith. Luther makes faith, by contrast, a *personal appropriation*. He writes: “To believe that there is a God (*credere deum*) seems an easy thing to many ... But ... such faith is human, like any other mental activity of man such as art, the cultivation of wisdom ... All these things tumble to ruins as soon as temptation assails” (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Early Theological Works*, 209). Luther continues, “Faith is a different thing, namely that we believe that we ourselves are of the number of those for whom God exists and for whom he is their rewarder ... This faith does not come from nature, but from grace” (209–10). “Faith is not to be conceived in active terms, in the sense of proving as proof, but in passive terms, in the sense of something proven or accepted” (203).

One of his most celebrated aphorisms is: “Be a sinner and sin boldly (*esto peccator et pecca fortiter*).” But, he adds, “Have faith and rejoice in Christ more boldly

still, for he is victor over sin, death, and the world” (*Letter to Melanchthon*, August 1, 1521). The first part of the sentence is rhetorical, to make a point. Luther insists, “Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times ... It makes men glad and bold and happy ... to serve everyone, to suffer everything, in love and praise of God” (*Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* [1522], cited in Rupp and Drewery (eds.), *Martin Luther*). Luther also writes on this importance of love. He asserts, “A person is obliged to do nothing except love his neighbor, as St. Paul says in Rom. ch. 13, and Christ says in John ch. 16 ... Because he [Christ] has loved them, they no longer need to love themselves but ... must now turn to their neighbor’s good” (*Letter to the Christians in Riga, Tallin, and Tartu* [1523], in *Letters*, 196).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) begins with an Augustinian doctrine of grace. The “church” of the Thessalonians (v. 1) is not merely a gathering of human faith, not just a “faith-community,” but “the work and building of both the Father and of Christ” (*Commentary*, 73). It is because of God that the readers are “in Christ” (1 Cor. 1:30). Paul commends the church (v. 3), and does not pass over their previous progress in silence, although they “still have to travel ... and to make progress” (73). “Always” suggests that Paul “constantly receives new reasons to give thanks for them” (74). “They have not ‘made progress from the strength of men’; therefore Paul’s thanksgiving is to God. If the former were the case, this would be worthless. In v. 4, Calvin recognizes that Paul boasts of their perseverance and progress to other churches; but stresses that this is “not from a spirit of ambition,” but as a spur to others to copy them (74). He writes, “Nothing sustains us in trials as much as faith does.” Impatience is a sign of unbelief.

Calvin writes, “All the elected of God are so joined together in Christ that they depend on one head ... living together under the same spirit of God” (*Institutes* 4.1.2; tr. Beveridge, 2.282). Ministers cannot credit themselves with what God does or has done in the church (1 Cor. 3:7; *Institutes* 4.1.6; tr. Beveridge, 2.287). It is God who gives the increase. Moreover “church” includes both the “mixed” visible community and the “invisible” church of true people of God (*Institutes* 4.1.7–16; tr. Beveridge, 2.288–95). The *Institutes* and *Commentary* are at one.

**Lancelot Andrewes** (1555–1626), bishop of Winchester, and chaplain to Elizabeth I, is known for addressing problems of court and for his *Private Devotions*. On “thanksgiving” he writes:

How truly meet, and right, and comely, and due,  
in all, and for all things  
in all times, places, and manners ...  
to praise Thee,  
to bless Thee, to hymn Thee,

and give thanks to Thee,  
 Maker, Nourisher, Guardian, Governor,  
 Healer, Benefactor, Perfector of all,  
 Lord and Father, King and God ...

(“The First Day,” in Whyte, *Lancelot Andrewes  
 and His Private Devotions*)

**George Herbert** (1593–1633) does not appear to quote 2 Thess. 1:1–4, but his poem “Affliction” resonates with v. 4b:

My heart did heave, and there came forth, O God!  
 By that I knew that thou wast in the grief,  
 To guide and govern it to my relief,  
 Making a sceptre of the rod:  
 Hadst thou not had thy part  
 Sure the unruly sigh had broke my heart.

But since thy breath gave me both life and shape,  
 Thou knowst my tallies, and when there's assign'd  
 So much breath to a sigh, what's then behinde?  
 Or if some yeares with it escape,  
 The sigh then only is  
 A gale to bring me sooner to my blisse.

(*Works*, 70)

A second poem on *affliction* can be found in “Broken in pieces ...” (89).

**Thomas Watson** (1620–86), Puritan divine and dissenter, was known for his devotional writings. On 2 Thess. 1:1–3 he writes, “We cannot grow too much in grace; there is ... no excess here. The body may grow too great ... but faith cannot grow too great ... Here was ‘exceeding,’ yet not ‘excess.’ As men cannot have too much health, so not too much grace. Grace is the beauty of holiness (Ps. 118); we cannot have too much spiritual beauty” (*A Body of Practical Divinity* 6.9, p. 198).

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) compares degrees of faith with “from faith to faith” (*Commentary*, 3.754). The readers’ love is reciprocal: love for each other. Poole calls faith and love “two sister graces ... always found more or less together” (754). “Glorying includes high estimation of a thing,” but whether glorying is good or evil depends on “the manner or object of it.” Thus it is evil to “glory in men” (1 Cor. 3:21), but it is good to glory “in the knowledge of the Lord” (Jer. 9:24), or in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14). Paul’s thanksgiving was not to exalt himself, but “to magnify the grace of God” (754). Suffering in itself is not to be desired, but faith and patience in the face of suffering can so transform it that “a Christian is strengthened under his suffering” (755).

## The Eighteenth Century

**William Law** (1686–1761), an Anglican theologian and devotional writer, writes on love in his celebrated *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728). He wrote: “Let universal love and intercessions for all men be the subject of your prayers ... ‘A new commandment,’ says our blessed Lord, ‘I give unto you, that ye love one another as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples ...’ (Jn. 13:34–35). If men are to know that we are disciples of Christ, by thus loving one another ... we make it plainly known to men ... A love that is not universal may indeed have tenderness and affection, but ... it is but humour and temper, or interest. The noblest motive to this universal affection is founded in this doctrine, ‘God is love’” (*A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, ch. 20, pp. 277–8). He tells of a “holy priest,” Ouranius, who loves every person in his country village. Once he had a haughty disposition, but he has prayed away this spirit (ch. 21, pp. 295–6).

**Jonathan Swift** (1667–1745) wrote *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), an ecclesiastical satire, to answer the question, “What has happened to original faith?” He set up a debate between “Martin” (Luther and the Anglicans), “Jack” (Calvin and the Dissenters), and “Peter” (the Roman Catholic Church). The Epistles to the Thessalonians represent our earliest written account of the original faith. In relative terms, Swift was perhaps least polemical towards Anglicanism, and here in 2 Thess. 1:1–4 Paul thanks God for an increase of original faith. Swift played a large part in political and literary life under the reign of Queen Anne, was dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin. He is most famous for *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726).

**Isaac Watts** (1674–1748), the hymn-writer, knew about distress and affliction (2 Thess. 1:4). He wrote a hymn in 1719 based on Psalm 46:

God is the refuge of his saints,  
When storms of sharp distress invade;  
Ere we can offer our complaints,  
Behold him present with his aid.  
Let mountains from their seats be hurled  
Down to the deep, and buried there,  
Convulsion shake the solid world  
Our faith shall never yield to fear.

(*Methodist Hymn Book*, 705)

**John Wesley** (1703–91) says that in 2 Thess. 1:1–4 Paul “wraps up his praise of men in praise to God, giving him the glory” (*Notes on the New Testament*, 2.697). In his book *Christian Perfection*, he also writes, “If we suffer persecution

and affliction in a right manner, we attain a higher measure of conformity to Christ ... In the greatest afflictions which can befall the just ... they remain immovable in peace.”

John’s brother **Charles Wesley** (1707–88) expresses the wonder of grace in the last verse of “Jesu, lover of my soul”:

Plenteous grace with thee is found,  
Grace to cover all my sin;  
Let the healing streams abound,  
Make and keep me pure within.  
Thou of life the fountain art;  
Freely let me take of thee;  
Spring thou up within my heart,  
Rise to all eternity.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 193)

**John Newton** (1725–1807) is best known for his hymn on grace:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
That sav’d a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved,  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believ’d.

(*Olney Hymns* 41, p. 538)

It may seem extravagant to read full theological meaning out of “grace” in an address or greeting, but we have seen that some church fathers did this.

## The Nineteenth Century

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) describes as “something extraordinary” Paul’s generous thanks to God for the readers’ faith and love when he is not content with the state of the church (*Commentary*, 437). Paul will denounce their aberrations, but he can nevertheless commend their faith and love. Many “aberrations” are due to an overeagerness of their faith. Olshausen comments, “They had both faith and love, but without being as yet able rightly to direct them by means of wisdom” (438). Moreover, “their powerful faith” operated “brilliantly” in the face of persecutions (see 1 Thess. 1:7; 2:19). Faith included

“the irrefragable fixedness of conviction, which allows itself to be perplexed by no combats” (438). “Faith” is understood in a comprehensive, but also Lutheran, sense.

**James Denney** (1856–1917) rehearses Paul’s thanksgiving for “the wonderful growth of their [the readers’] faith” (*Thessalonians*, 272). However, there are “faults as well as graces” in the church. The very spread of the gospel has excited opposition. Paul also sees that his teaching about the Advent has been overpressed, as if to imply that the day of the Lord has already arrived (274). This is the main lesson of this epistle (276). Paul begins by wishing the readers peace, which includes “completeness, wholeness, health” (278). On the church, Denney offers the application, “Some of us have this lesson to learn . . . we are too ready to see everything in it except what is God” (280). It is easy, but not really Christian, to find fault with churches. Paul, by contrast, looks to what is good, for which he gives thanks to God (281). Again, Denney finds a practical application. He asks, “Have we become more loving than we were?” (283). Can ministers feel “justly proud” of their congregation (286)?

# 2 Thessalonians

1:5–12

## Encouragement and Prayer: The Judgment of God and the Revelation of Christ

### Introduction and Overview

Some regard 2 Thess. 1:5–12 as too “Jewish” to have been written by Paul. But Arthur Moore and others respond that this passage simply stands in continuity with the Old Testament, which profoundly influenced Paul (Moore, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 93). Paul refers to “affliction” (Greek, *thlipsis*) in several other epistles, including Rom. 8:35; 2 Cor. 12:10; and 1 Thess. 1:6 (Rigaux,

*Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, 618). This passage expands the theme introduced in v. 4, namely encouragement to endure, in the face of affliction.

We argued in the Introduction that apocalyptic, far from being “un-Pauline” remains integral to Paul, and adds dynamism, robustness, and God-centeredness to his theology. We cited the work of J. C. Beker, J. L. Martyn, Klaus Koch, and Alexandra Brown, who have proved this point. In terms of reception history, it is here that tension and provocation emerge between the church fathers and their successors, and many modern readers. These latter are often influenced unduly by the Enlightenment, and frequently by Protestant liberalism from Schleiermacher to Harnack. Chrysostom comments, “Let us not be too soft about hell, judgement, and fire.” This represents an earlier tradition.

Apocalyptic and a kindred theology of the new creation arise especially in situations of affliction and persecution. Fire becomes a common metaphor for theophany (see Isa. 66:15; Apoc. Baruch 48:59). “Eternal destruction” (Greek, *olethron aiōnion*) may perhaps mean only “age-long.” “Be worthy of the coming age” (see vv. 5, 11) was a common rabbinic maxim, with which Paul was doubtless familiar. The theme of divesting a powerful oppressor of his power constitutes a central and well-known feature of apocalyptic. It is found in the teaching of Jesus about a strong man who must be bound in order that a greater can plunder his goods (Matt. 12:26–9).

“Vengeance” (v. 8), here, has nothing to do with personal retaliation. It stems from God’s providential governance of the world, as one who is just or righteous. In liberation theology José Porfirio Miranda has shown that God’s “righteousness” has to do with “putting things to rights” both in the *social* sphere and the personal (*Marx and the Bible*, 229–48). Hence, “It is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you” (v. 6). The sighing and yearning of the afflicted for justice cannot readily be appreciated by those who live in a comfortable and secure environment. Paul therefore assures those who are afflicted in Thessalonica that God has not abandoned them. Because he is righteous, judgment may be brought forward, but in all events it is certain.

The last days concern not only the judgment of the unbelieving and oppressors. Christ will come “to be glorified in his saints” (v. 10). Paul will return to this subject. Ben Witherington follows I. H. Marshall in arguing, “The God whom Paul is describing is a God who does offer love and reconciliation to his enemies, but if they refuse this offer ... they must face justice” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 193). The glorification of the faithful is connected with God’s victory over evil. The prayer in vv. 11–12 looks forward to the Parousia of Christ, and prays that meanwhile God “will make you worthy of his call” (v. 11). Once again, this first chapter ends as it began: everything is in vain without God’s grace (1:2 and 1:12).

## The Apostolic Fathers and the Patristic Era

**Ignatius** (c. 35–107) declared, “Pray without ceasing on behalf of others” (*Letter to the Ephesians* 10.1; ANF 1.53; also Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 185; see v. 11). He also says, “Your prayer shall make me perfect for God, that I may attain the lot” (*Letter to the Philadelphians* 5.1; ANF 1.82; Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 243). **Polycarp** (c.69–c. 155) speaks of judgment and the Antichrist, and adds, “Watching unto prayer” (*Epistle of Polycarp* 7.2; Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 293). The Antichrist is not mentioned in Thessalonians, so this must be one of the first references to this figure after 1 and 2 John. The *Didachē* (c. 80–140) declares, “You should pray in this way,” followed by the Lord’s Prayer (*Didachē* 8.3; Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 321). Among the second-century apologists, **Justin** (c. 100–c. 165) refers to rising to pray, and to offering prayers and thanksgivings (*Apology* 1.17; ANF 1.168).

**Irenaeus** (c. 130–c. 200), the first systematic theologian of the church, quotes explicitly from the whole of 2 Thess. 1:7–10: “Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation ...” (v. 7) through “the revealing of our Lord Jesus from heaven with his mighty angels, and in a flame of fire” (vv. 7–8) to “glorified in his saints and to be admired ...” (v. 10; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.27.4; ANF 1.500–1). In relation to Jauss’s theme of “provocation,” he condemns those who exaggerate the mercy of Christ, and are silent about the last judgment (4: 28). He comments, “In both Testaments there is the same righteousness of God [displayed] when God takes vengeance ... The fire is eternal, and the wrath of God shall be revealed from heaven.” But, he adds, “They keep silence with regard to his judgement” (see Matt. 26:24). Irenaeus alludes to the Gnostic contrast between an allegedly wrathful Creator God of the Old Testament, and a loving and mild God of the New Testament (*Against Heresies* 4.28.1–2; ANF 1.501).

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) similarly attacks Marcion for trying to erase the last judgment from the New Testament. He quotes 2 Thess. 1:6–8 and 1:8–9, in full: “It is a righteous thing to recompense tribulation to them who afflict us ... the Lord Jesus Christ shall be revealed as coming from heaven with the angels of might and in flaming fire” (*Against Marcion* 5.16; ANF 3.463). The “heretic” tries to remove “in flaming fire” (v. 8). “Vengeance” and “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” are explicit predictions of Paul (vv. 8–9; *Against Marcion* 5.6; ANF 3.463). Christ “comes to inflict punishment.” There can be no opposition between the Testaments; for Paul uses words from Isaiah (Isa. 2:19). Tertullian further applies this to the fate of the “Man of Sin” in 2 Thess. 2:1–6, and introduces the Antichrist (ch. 16; 464).

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) takes up the theme of the judgment of God. He cites the words of Jesus, “For every careless word you will render account on the day of judgement” (Matt. 12:36; Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 7). He speaks of endurance under trials in 2 Macc. 7:25, and of God’s judgment against the tyrant Antiochus (*Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 26). He alludes to the wrath of God in the golden calf narrative (Exod. 32:11; Origen, *On Prayer* 10.3), of God’s judgment being “in the right” in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (Exod. 9:27; *On Prayer* 28.16), and of God’s judgments as “unsearchable” in Rom. 11:33 (*On First Principles* 4.3.14). Martyrs who confess the faith are commended by God and the angels as “tried and true,” and pass through “the flaming sword that . . . guards the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24)” (*An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 36).

On prayer, Origen appeals to the parable of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–8; 18:1–2) for perseverance in prayer (vv. 11–12; Origen, *On Prayer* 10.2), and to Paul’s example of “praying constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17; 2 Thess. 1:11; *On Prayer* 12.2). He refers to “pray constantly” in connection with the Lord’s Prayer (*On Prayer* 22.5). Paul always “prays appropriately” for his converts (*On Prayer* 25.2), praying with a character “divinized” by the word of God. Elsewhere he observes, “What better gift can a rational being send up to God than a fragrant word of prayer, when it is offered from a conscience untainted with the foul smell of sin?” (*On Prayer* 2.2). He also discusses prayer in other writings. He criticizes those who rely entirely on books and on knowledge: “for most essential is prayer for the understanding of divine things” (*Letter to Gregory*). Prayer may be addressed to Christ, as well as to God (*Against Celsus* 8.26; ANF 4.649).

The *Appendix* to the *Works* of **Hippolytus** (c. 170–c. 236) concerns the end of the world, the Antichrist, and the Parousia of Christ. It pronounces blessings upon those who have resisted and overcome the tyrant (*Appendix* 30; ANF 5.251–4), the manifestation of Christ from heaven (36), the judgment of God (36–7) and “the coming of the righteous and terrible Judge” when the whole shall be burnt up “by reason of the deeds done in it, which men did corruptly” (*Appendix* 37; see also 39, 41–9, which alludes to Matt. 25:32–34 and to standard apocalyptic material, ANF 5.251–4).

**Lactantius** (c. 250–c. 325) devoted several chapters of his *Divine Institutes* to eschatology, sometimes in terms of earthly as well as cosmic events. In 7.14–27, he speaks of 10 kings who will devastate the earth in apocalyptic vein (ch. 16); then a “powerful enemy will suddenly arise and overthrow cities by fire, sword, and earthquake,” and there will be falling stars; a false prophet will arise and the righteous will suffer (ch. 17); he who is the Antichrist will arise (ch. 18); then “those who have not known God shall be judged” (ch. 20), and “the same divine fire . . . will burn the wicked,” and “the great Judge shall make an investigation of

their deserts” (ch. 21). Resurrection and the renewal of the world follow (chs. 23–4). The devil is loosed (ch. 26), but the devout receive happiness from “the most just Judge” (ch. 27).

**Basil the Great** (c. 330–379) reminds his readers to keep before their minds “that day and that hour ... the tribunal where no excuses will prevail” (*Letters* 174; NPNF2 8.220). He recites some of the articles of the Nicene Creed, including the future coming of Christ (*Letters* 210.3; NPNF2 8.249). He explicitly quotes from 2 Thess. 1:7: “When the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his angels” (Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 13.29; NPNF2 8.19). His point is why Paul associates angels with God the Father and with God the Son. The Spirit is called “Lord,” but angels are “allies of their fellow-slaves and faithful witnesses of the truth” (13.29). It does not detract from the deity of Father, Son, and Spirit, that angels accompany him.

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) in his full-scale commentary comments that it exemplifies God’s just judgment to shine forth either to good or to evil, but to render to each according to his deeds (*Commentarius*, 3.237). Judgment takes place at the Parousia of Christ, when he will come with his heavenly angels and fire, to render their due to the heathen, who are ignorant of God. The judgment may bring “eternal punishment” (*cum aeternis poenis*, v. 10). But in vv. 11–12, Paul prays always for his readers with joy (238). He prays that they may be worthy of God’s call and continue in faithfulness.

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) rightly relates the section on judgment to the righteous government of a just God (*Homily 2 on 2 Thessalonians*; NPNF1 13.382). It is part of the theme that “God cares for human affairs.” That God shows wrath to the wicked is “indisputable.” “If this is just with men, [it is] much more with God.” What role do Christians play? Chrysostom argues: if they are “partners in the afflictions,” Christians will be “partners also in the retribution.” God sets heaven before their eyes (v. 7). Yet Chrysostom includes a warning: “Let us not rejoice at the punishment of others as being avenged.” He continues, “Let us, however, even thus consider the blessings of the kingdom and the miseries of hell” (*Hom.* 2; NPNF1 13.382). Even good things in this life are as nothing compared with the blessings of the kingdom.

Yet anything terrible should make us think of hell. Chrysostom declares, “*If we always think of hell, we shall not soon fall into it*” (*Hom.* 2; 382; my emphasis). The aphorism is italicized because it constitutes another example of what Jauss calls *tension* or *provocation* in relation to many present-day attitudes. Present-day views of “hell” are as much a prisoner of their own age (or to what Gadamer and Jauss call “historical finitude,” *Geschichtlichkeit*) as Chrysostom’s age was to his. He continues, “The remembrance of it [hell] is able to work great good” (*Hom.* 2; 382). He then adds: “*Dost thou fear the offensiveness of such words? Hast thou, then, if thou art silent, extinguished hell? ... Let it be continually*

spoken of, that thou mayest never fall into it” (*Hom.* 2; NPNF1 13.383; my emphasis). “Fear has more power than the promise ... Let us not exercise our ears to be over soft and tender ... for the sake of what was God’s will.” Chrysostom finally (on this verse) offers two analogies. First, the soul is like wax; “cold” discourses harden it, but fiery ones melt it. Second, discourses are to souls (or lives) what winds are to sailing ships: they are their driving force. *A person who stands before the judgment-seat of Christ will hardly be grateful for past silence about that situation, or grateful for talk about anything else except that situation* (*Hom.* 2; NPNF1 13.384).

On vv. 9–10, as we should expect, Chrysostom gives to “eternal destruction” its full weight. We should not think of “hell” as less terrible than it will be. It is “*not temporary*” (my emphasis), and involves *exclusion* “from the face (or presence) of the Lord” (*Hom.* 3; 384). But God will show his glory in the saints. It will be a source of wonder or marvel (*Hom.* 3; 385). Hence in v. 11 Paul prays that the readers may be “worthy” of this call to future glory. It is like our Lord’s teaching, where he says, “The bridegroom cometh” (Matt. 25:6; *Hom.* 3; NPNF1 13.385). We must not become slothful in the interim time. Even now, “tribulation for the sake of Christ is glory ... [but] how much more shall we become” (*Hom.* 3; 385). To say that judgment and eschatology play a major role for Chrysostom would be no overstatement. At minimum it provides a strong Christian motivation.

**Augustine** (354–430) quotes vv. 7–8: “When he shall come from heaven in a flame of fire to take vengeance on those who know not God” (*On Grace and Free Will* 5.3; NPNF1 5.446). The context is that of showing that ignorance provides no excuse which frees the offender from punishment, although Augustine admits that deliberate sin merits greater penalty than sins of ignorance. He alludes to v. 8 again, where Christ “slays with the breath of his mouth,” and discusses eschatological events more broadly (*City of God* 18.53 and 20.1–29; NPNF1 2.394 and 421–48). He began writing this work after Alaric the Goth had sacked Rome in 410. But in his other writings Augustine usually “spiritualizes” apocalyptic events. He follows the tradition of Tyconius, whom we shall consider in relation to 2 Thess. 2:3–12. Augustine’s reflections on the respective destinies of the earthly and heavenly cities, to which the work seeks a providential “reply,” constitute an exception. In *City of God* bk. 20 (written in 429) Augustine stresses that no one knows “the day or the hour” of the last day. Elsewhere he urges, “Everyone ought to fear the last day of his own life,” since that will be a person’s state at the day of judgment (*Letter* 199; PL 33.905). He will return to the figure of the Antichrist in 2 Thess. 2:3–12. His symbolic interpretation of much eschatology receives further comment in Kevin L. Hughes, *Constructing Antichrist*, 82–108. For example, Augustine points out that there is *both a last judgment and* that “God is always judging” *now* (*City of God* 20.1; NPNF1 2.421).

## The Medieval Church

**Bede the Venerable** of Jarrow (c. 673–735) is said to have produced *De Die Judicii*, though some attribute it to Alcuin. Bede confesses to sadness at the sins he had committed, “the blotches on my life and the loveless time of death”; after which he faces “the strict Judge’s eternal wrath towards the guilty” (*Cantica Canticorum* 122, 439–44; CCSL 119B.167–375). The day of judgment will bring “the joys of the saints as well as the punishments of the wicked.” Bede prostrates himself, and smites his heart. He declares, “Let all be brought to light.” His only hope is to show his tears and wounds to the heavenly Doctor, who received the penitent thief. “With one word of faith he merited salvation.” We must render account, but “the Almighty listens to you with open ears.” Bede pleads, “Do not scorn the times of forgiveness ... Remember how great are the torments that await the wicked.” The “high-throned” Judge will come from heaven to give everyone his [or her] due. “The earth will tremble and the mountains crumble down; the hills will melt ... the stars will fall, and the sun grow dark ... The wakened might of heaven will suddenly arrive ... May God keep you safe” (*De Die Judicii*, CC 122.439–44; see Godden and Lapidge (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, 172–89). As the millennial year 1000 approached, this work ascribed to Bede was resurrected in c. 950 in an anonymous poem called *Judgement Day II*, a reshaped and expanded version of it. ***Judgement Day II*** contains the lines

And murmuring I spake, troubled in mind  
Now, ye veins I bid you all  
That ye open the well-springs  
Hot in my face, quickly for tears,  
Then I, sinful, strike strongly with fist,  
Beat my heart in the place of prayer ...  
(ll. 25–30)

The poem continues with reflections on hell:

And the cruel worms will tear them  
And will gnaw their bones with burning tusks,  
Above all this will be that wretched breast,  
With bitter care frightened and troubled.  
(ll. 210–13)

Then Christ comes, and for the saints:

There is not mourning, nor is there weariness,  
Nor ruin, nor care, nor fierce torment.

Nor is there lightning, nor loathsome storm ...  
And in heaven's throne on high adorneth  
His kind Son, lord of Victory ...

(ll. 260–3, 276–7)

The poem concludes, “The saints above enjoy bliss henceforth without end” (ll. 304–5; see also Hoffmann, “Structure and Symbolism in the Judgement Day II”).

**Haimo of Auxere** (c. 810–c. 875) comments, “It is just for God to repay bad things for bad things and good things for good” (*Second Thessalonians*, 22). A disciple of Rabanus Maurus, Haimo refers to the coming of the Son of Man with “all the angels” (Matt. 25:31) when Christ will be revealed. Then “the heretics, the false Christians, and the Jews” will be judged “in flames of fire” (23). The fire will fill as much space in the air as water did in the flood: “this fire will burn the earth” and will “purify the elect” (23). Others will suffer punishment (v. 9) but in an important insight Haimo suggests that they will “inflict it on themselves.” He introduces a classical allusion: in Virgil, where Scylla gives punishment. Here he anticipates Dante and others.

**Thietland of Einsiedeln** (d. 965) was born on the brink of apocalyptic expectation of the end in 1000 (or in 1033). With the persecutions and afflictions of the Thessalonians, he compares Rom. 8:18, “The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared to the future glory which is to be revealed in us” (*Second Thessalonians*, 44). Like Haimo, he repeats that God is just: “Beautifully do they say ‘with us,’ to the extent that they who were imitators of the apostles shall have fellowship with them in the Kingdom of Heaven” (45). He compares 1 John 1:3, “that you may have fellowship with us.” He is near to a doctrine of “the communion of saints.” Like Haimo, Thietland refers to the coming of the Son of Man in Matt. 24:30. “Fire” is anticipated in Ps. 49:3, “Fire shall burn in his sight,” and referred to in Rev. 20:9, “Fire came down from heaven and consumed them” (46). But this is partly metaphorical, as in “fire of zeal.” The saints, however, will be rescued from the fire, and “protected unhurt” (46). Punishment will be “for ever” (47). He quotes Gregory of Rome: “God punishes the evil not according to the quantity of time by which they worked evil, but rather according to the intention of the heart.” On “eternal destruction” (v. 9) he declares, “There [i.e., in postmortal existence] death will be without death, destruction without wakening, and fire without light” (47).

In v. 10 Christ will appear glorious and wonderful to his saints. To them he will be glorious and pleasant; to the unjust, “terrible” (48). In v. 11 Paul prays but “the calling” is according to a purpose. As in Matt. 22:14, “Many are called, but few chosen.” “They join prayer to thanksgiving” (49). They pray that the church may “fulfil the will for his goodness.” When glorying in the Lord, they

should not “attribute this to their own merits” (50). Thietland shows an apocalyptic perspective.

The *Exeter Book* (c. 960–c. 990) or *Codex Exoniensis* is a tenth-century codex of Anglo-Saxon poetry, stored in Exeter Cathedral, donated by Leofric, bishop of Exeter. It is one of the four major Anglo-Saxon literature codices. It represents the rise of Benedictine thought, and belongs to the beginning of the influence of Dunstan (d. 998). J. R. R. Tolkien was influenced by the line, “Hail, Earendel, brightest of angels, over Middle Earth [*middangeard*] sent to men.” The stanza “Christ II” is modeled upon Gregory of Rome, *Homily* 19, for Ascension day. After Christ ascended to heaven, the church suffered oppression, but awaited the moment when Christ would redeem the world, and would “garland the hills and heights with his glory.” The Old English poem *The Phoenix* portrays an Eden-like paradise, death in self-sacrifice, and resurrection from ashes to eternal life. It contains the lines:

The redeeming Christ, high above its roofs [i.e., of the heavenly city]  
 Will shine upon souls steadfast in truth ...  
 Blissfully jubilant [follow] into that happy home everlasting to eternity ...  
 The rare and regal diadem of a prince  
 Will adorn with light each of the righteous ...  
 They will dwell in beauty, surrounded with glory.

*The Phoenix* expounds an allegory of death and resurrection. (More recent discussion of the *Exeter Book* can be found in Crossley-Holland, *Exeter Book Riddles*.)

**Shi’ite material** also emerged in the tenth century in the Ismā’li tract which expounded apocalyptic passages in the Qur’an. An expected redeemer is predicted to put to rights the cause of God. He wears the armor of a prophet and wields his sword (see McGinn (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Apocalypticism*, 2.251).

In the Christian tradition **Abbo of Fleury** (c. 945–1004) is often cited as an example of the “terrors of the year 1000” as the first millennium drew to its close. He recalls how he heard a sermon about the end of the world, which predicted the appearance of the Antichrist and the last judgment in 1000. It is possible that this notion has become exaggerated. But, as Bernard McGinn writes, “Medieval folk lived in a more or less constant state of apocalyptic expectation” (*Encyclopaedia of Apocalypticism*, 74–5). Towards 1000 it reached a new level of fervor.

**Bernard of Clairvaux** (1090–1153) wrote his *Sermons* on the Song of Songs as allegorical expositions of the marriage supper of Christ, in relation to the liturgical season of Advent. In about 1135 he introduced Peter Lombard to scholars in Paris; but Peter’s commentary on 2 Thessalonians reflects mainly a replicated patristic tradition, drawing especially upon Ambrosiaster, Theodore,

and Augustine. Peter urges that God's judgment is righteous, and exhorts patience among believers. He relates 2 Thessalonians to what Paul had said in the First Epistle. He offers primarily a sharpened form of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, which became the standard medieval commentary.

**Joachim of Fiore** (c. 1135–1202), biblical exegete and mystic, became a monk in the Benedictine order, and abbot in 1177. His *Expositio in Apocalypsim* expounded the apocalyptic notion of God's control of history divided into "ages." Real predictions of imminent events could be made. He saw an era of the Holy Spirit as the millennium, which would come after the Antichrist, or even between Antichrists. The millennium will witness a perfect church. A coming "universal pontiff," or pope, will oppose the Antichrist, although later in his comment on 2 Thess. 2:4 he suspects that the pope may become the "Man of Sin," and demand to be worshipped. Thus his model of cosmic events differs from that of Augustine and Jerome.

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) followed the tradition of Tyconius, Jerome, and Augustine (except for *City of God* 18–20). He seems to include relatively little apocalyptic eschatology. He does quote 2 Thess. 1:11, but he sees "the work of faith in power" as referring to "confession, which is a work proper to faith" (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 3, art. 1). Eschatology is largely subsumed under "hope," which is a "virtue" (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 17–22). Hope is grounded in God, as Paul asserts (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 18, art. 2). Resurrection is an act of God, not of human persons. He refers to the last judgment in Matt. 25:41 (2.2, qu. 18, art. 3).

**Arnold of Villanova** (c. 1238–c. 1312) produced a *Treatise on the Time of Antichrist's Coming* in 1300, based on an exegesis of Dan. 12:7ff. He predicted a coming in 1368. He then worked on Matthew 24, with special attention to the tribulation of the saints and the coming of the "angelic pope." His vision was cosmic, with a battle between the elect and the Antichrist. Then Christ would come as Judge. He produced his *Exposition of Revelation* in 1306, again correlating historical events with symbolic figures. The material is also parallel with our passage in 2 Thess. 1:5–12 and also 2:3–12. Arnold is far from alone.

**Goeffrey Chaucer** (c. 1340–1400) concluded his *Canterbury Tales* with *The Parson's Tale*, which has a number of apocalyptic allusions to the last judgment. He writes that one cause to move people to contrition "is fear of the day of doom and the horrible pains of Hell. For as St. Jerome says, 'Every time that I remember the day of doom, I quake ... Greatly ought a man to fear such a judgement.'" We shall all be, as St. Paul says, "before the throne of our Lord Jesus Christ ... There shall we have a Judge that cannot be corrupted or deceived ... The wrath of God will spare no one ... There will be no hope of escape ... There shall the stern and angry Judge sit above, and under Him the

horrible pit of Hell ... Without shall be the world all burning; and within ... the tearing of conscience.” The figure of the “Parson” quotes biblical writers, church fathers, Bernard, Anselm, and others to support him. “Hell is a band of darkness, as darkness itself ... which hinders ... seeing the face of God.” Shame and confusion prevail. Job, Isaiah, and Jeremiah provide consolation. “Horror and guilty fear shall dwell there without end” (*The Parson’s Tale*, ll. 158–84, with omissions). Chaucer witnesses to the apocalyptic teaching of the age, which has parallels with 2 Thess. 1:5–12 and 2:3–12.

**John Wycliffe** (c. 1333–84) became master of Balliol College, and professor of divinity at Oxford, but because of his polemic against the papacy, was forced to retire from Oxford University to Lutterworth. His works on the truth of scripture, *On Antichrist*, and on the power of the popes, portray the papacy and monks as representing the Antichrist. Yet he resisted the most radical kind of apocalyptic millenarianism. He often referred to the Antichrist. He wrote, “The Pope is the evident (*patulus*) Antichrist, not just the individual person ... but the multitude of popes ... The person of the Antichrist was a monstrous composite one” (*opus evangelicum*, 3.107). The figure was thus symbolic or metaphorical, but demonstrated the dimension of cosmic conflict. Wycliffe appeared to include little on 2 Thess. 1:5–12, but did write on 2 Thess. 2:3–12.

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) discussed 2 Thess. 1: 8–9 in the context of expounding Heb. 4:12, “The Word of God is living and active” (*Early Theological Writings*, 95). He quotes Chrysostom as asserting, “The Word is more cruel than any sword,” and cites punishments of which God warns, as well as “even just to face the angry countenance of God (Ps. 21:9).” 2 Thess. 1:8–9 fills out the notion of punishment and separation from the face of the Lord. Yet apocalyptic events are not his primary interest. He made no comment, for example, on Heb. 12:26–29, and says little on Heb. 12:18–21. Yet he does speak much of “the tribulations of those who confess Christ” as being “a manifest token of their own salvation and of the punishment of the tyrants” (2 Thess. 1:5–6; *Letters*, 225). He endorses belief in the last judgment and the future resurrection (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 28: *1 Corinthians 7 and 15*, 164–213).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) asserted that persecutions “clearly show that God will one day be the Judge of the world” (*Commentary*, 75). This differs entirely from a secular worldview, when everything seems to occur “by chance,” and leaves God out of thinking. People who suffer often blame God, or think that he does not care. Calvin suggested that Ovid was such a one. In circumstances

of suffering Ovid declared, “I am tempted to think there are no gods” (75). Even “Asaph” lamented in the Psalms, “They say, ‘How can God know?’” (Ps. 73:11–12). Since he is Judge, however, God will one day restore peace to the afflicted. “Faith” dictates that as the just Judge, he will “repay” the oppressor: “He will one day ascend the judgement-seat and will remedy the state of affairs ... and put them right” (76). His double use of “one day” shows that Calvin was not concerned to determine timing. He stresses, in accordance with his doctrine of grace, that no effort of ours can make us “worthy” of God’s heavenly kingdom (76).

Paul explicitly asserts, Calvin urged, that Christ will be revealed from heaven in blazing fire (v. 7b): “The nature of the fire ... I leave to those people who are full of idle curiosity” (78). He does not wish to press the literal details of apocalyptic. But he asserts, “Christ will bring the angels with him in order to display the glory of his kingdom” (78). Angels have a place for Calvin in theology. The persecutions, again, will not go unpunished (v. 8): “It is necessary that God should inflict vengeance on them [the oppressors].” But typically he asserts, this was “for the sake of his own glory” (78). He suggests, “It is not right to want vengeance on people,” especially on specific people. Our hearts must be pure and controlled. On “eternal destruction” (v. 9) Calvin speaks of “the perpetuity of death ... The effect of that death will never end” (79). But Paul returns to the future vision in v. 10 when Christ “will vindicate them [believers] with his glory ... Christ will not have this glory for himself alone, but it will possess all the saints” (79). He will gather them “into the same fellowship with himself.” Calvin contrasts the *now* of affliction with the *then* of glory. The Thessalonians can in hope “leap forward” to resurrection, and to what still lies hidden. Because they have not yet arrived, however, Paul constantly prays for them that God may complete his purpose in them (80; v. 11). This coheres with Calvin’s theology that the goal of prayer is not only “their faith,” but “God’s good purpose” (80). God, not humankind, is his central concern (81).

Calvin points out that 2 Thess. 1:5–7 in no way suggests that God’s judgment of oppressors represents a “reward” for faithfulness (*Institutes* 3.18.7; tr. Beveridge, 2.125). He also quotes 2 Thess. 1:6–8 in his chapter on the last resurrection. God can raise the dead, he argues, because he is omnipotent or *almighty*. Jesus Christ “shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire” (*Institutes* 3.25.4; tr. Beveridge, 2.265). He writes, “The Apostle made no trivial declaration when he said that unbelievers shall be ‘punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord ...’” (*Institutes* 3.25.12; tr. Beveridge, 2.276). On “eternal felicity,” he declares, “He will be glorified in his saints, and admired in all that believe (2 Thess. 1:10)” (*Institutes* 3.25.10; tr. Beveridge, 2.273). The prayer in v. 11 cannot be used to undermine the all-sufficiency of grace (*Institutes* 2.5.8; tr. Beveridge, 2.280).

**Estius** (1542–1613), Catholic chancellor of Douai, draws on the tradition of Ambrosiaster, Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas, on the just judgment of God (v. 5; *D. Pauli Epistolas*, 2.598). He comments “It is necessary to note a refutation of the heresy of Calvin and the rest of the sectarians of our time that they seem commonly to ignore: the reasoning (or account, *rationem*) of divine justice that after remission of eternal punishment there remains temporary punishment which must atone (or “complete the penalty”; 599). This must be a reference to Calvin’s rejection of *purgatory*. For Estius, “righteous judgement” entails purgatory for some Christians; for Calvin, it could not, without undermining the vicarious and all-sufficient death of Christ. He continues, “This place shows, against the heretics, that eternal life, which is understood to occur in the kingdom of God is not such as to be bestowed by the grace of God [alone], but is bestowed certainly by the worthiness or merit of persons coming from the grace of God” (599). Otherwise Paul would not pray that the readers should be made “worthy of the kingdom of God” (v. 5b). Estius is usually restrained about Protestantism, but sees v. 5 as decisive for a Catholic reply. The kingdom of God, for him, lies on the yonder side of purgatory.

On v. 6 Estius further expands on the justice of God. He urges the certainty of *reward* for those who undergo persecution (v. 7). Our Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven, who may now seem far off (*remotus*), but will then be seen publicly by all (600). His coming entails the blessing of the saints and the judgment. Christ’s coming will be in flames of fire (v. 8), which gives “at the same time both light and horror” (600). Estius cites 1 Corinthians 3, Wisdom 13, and Psalm 78. He anticipates the question: “In what way ‘eternal?’” (v. 9). “I answer ... eternal death ... always wretched (*miseri*) in eternity” (601). He rejects Origen’s notion to the contrary. “Wondered at” (v. 10) may be a metaphor, but the cause is not hidden: the Lord will be admired for his excellent or distinguished glory, which he will give to the saints (602). Paul prays that the readers may implement their calling to faith (v. 11).

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) was professor of theology at Leiden, and founder of an anti-Calvinist school in Protestant theology. He commented on the righteousness or justice of God (2 Thess. 1:6) as being God’s “eternal and constant will to render everyone his own” (*Works*, 1, *Disputation* 4.75, p. 245). His justice is both “Disposing and Remunerative,” both “according to the rule of equity” (245). Arminius affirms the punishment of “everlasting destruction,” together with “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). But predestination does not determine the fate of “those who obey not the gospel (2 Thess. 1:8, 9; Arminius, *Works*, 1.3.11.1, p. 115). Elsewhere Arminius refers to 2 Thess. 1:9 to explain how great the fate was to be, from which Christian believers have been rescued, namely “everlasting destruction” (Arminius, *Works*, 1, *Disputation* 15.10, p. 303). *Disputation* 37 discusses the

regal office of Christ. He declares, “Judgement is the last act of the regal office of Christ, by which justly . . . he pronounces sentence concerning all the thoughts, words, deeds, and omissions of all men” (*Works*, 1.37, p. 45). God is “justice itself” (202).

**John Owen** (1616–83), Puritan theologian, attacked Arminianism. He became dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and dedicated his work *A Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653) to Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, and chancellor of Oxford. The justice about which Owen wrote was called “vindicatory justice.” He had in mind the wars “and destruction of this country” which he observed in the military forces. He alluded to Gen. 18:25, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (*Divine Justice*, 45). He did not see this principle as in any way un-Pauline. The God “who taketh vengeance” appears in Rom. 3:5–6. Indeed, in spite of Owen’s Puritan concern with Scripture, he appealed to innate human reason to anticipate such justice. He appealed for example to Hesiod:

Justice is a virgin, descended from Jupiter,  
Chaste, and honoured by the heavenly deities;  
And when anyone hath injured her with impious indignity,  
Instantly she, seated beside her father Saturnian Jupiter,  
Complains of the iniquity of men.

(Hesiod, *Works*, 256)

Owen comments, “The glory of God is displayed in doing things that are just” (Prov. 17:15; *Divine Justice*, ch. 7, p. 92), citing 2 Thess. 1:6 and Rom. 1:32 (92). He argued that justice may be reformatory or retributory (ch. 14, p. 136). Quoting 2 Pet. 3:7, Owen concluded that all will acknowledge the truth, which entails godliness, and the banishing of sin and darkness. God is thus glorified (Owen, *Divine Justice*, ch. 18, p. 167).

**Thomas Vincent** (1634–78) tells of the Great Plague, and produces one of the most violent, polemical, and harsh treatises against the sufferings of the wicked in hell ever written. He begins by quoting Ps. 11:6 about “fire and brimstone” (*Fire and Brimstone*, 1). The fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, he declares, represented only a shadow of “streams of fire and brimstone, which in hell shall burn the wicked eternally” (1). He quotes Matt. 13:30 and 25:14 to support his view of “chaff cast into the unquenchable fire” (ch. 5). Then he cites 2 Thess. 1:7–9 concerning “mighty angels in flaming fire” (ch. 5). The fire will be irresistible, continual, and everlasting. To those destined for hell, he declares, “Think what in hell will be denied unto you . . . You could find no room for Christ in your hearts here.” You will lose “that unspeakable happiness of heaven . . . You will be ready to tear yourselves to pieces for madness and vexation.” Consider “the soreness and intolerableness of it . . . Your eyes . . . tongues . . . hands . . . heads . . . backs . . . will

be full of pain” (ch. 8). Anguish of soul will exceed this torture of the body. God will bind the wicked together in chains of darkness.

**John Milton** (1608–74), English poet and part-political official, included in his famous blank-verse epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1658–64) a portrait of the coming of the enthroned God, the cosmic battle between good and evil, and an impression of hell. He served under both Charles I and Oliver Cromwell. Dualism, the human plight, divine intervention, and the just God are all features of apocalyptic and of 2 Thess. 1:5–12. The now blind Milton wrote in book 1:

His doom  
 Reserved him to move wrath; for now he thought  
 Both of lost happiness and lasting pain  
 Torments him; round he throws his baleful eyes  
 That witness huge affliction and dismay  
 Mixt with obdurate pride and steadfast hate  
 At once as far as Angels kenn he views  
 The dismal situation waste and wilde,  
 A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
 As one great furnace flam'd, yet from these flames  
 No light, but rather darkness visible,  
 Serv'd only to discover sights of woe,  
 Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
 And sect can never dwell, hope never comes,  
 That comes to all: but torture without end.

(Bk. 1, ll. 53–67)

In book 10 Milton wrote of the coming and judgment of Christ:

But whom send I to judge them? Whom but thee  
 Vicegerent Son, to thee I have transferred  
 All judgement whether in Heav'n, or Earth, or Hell ...  
 Towards the right hand of his Glorie, on the Son  
 Blaz'd forth unclouded Deitie; he full  
 Resplendent all his Father manifest.

(Bk. 10, ll. 55–8, 64–6)

Finally, Milton showed the cosmic battle and victory that ensues:

When Jesus, Son of Mary, second Eve,  
 Saw Satan fall like Lightning down from Heav'n.  
 Prince of the Aire; then rising from his Grave  
 Spoil'd Principalities and Power, triumpht  
 In the open clear, and with ascention bright

Captivity led captive through the Aire ...  
 Whom he shall tread at last under our feet.  
 (Bk. 10, ll. 183–90)

In book 11 Milton pointed to further the judgment of the satanic victims:

Of heart-sick Agoni, all feavorous kinds,  
 Convulsions, Epilepsies, fierce Catarrhs,  
 Intestin Stone and Ulcer, Colic gangs,  
 Demonic Phrenzie, moaping Melancholic,  
 And moon-struck madness, pining Atrophic.  
 (Bk. 11, ll. 482–6)

Milton depended on Virgil's *Aeneid* for much of his imagery of hell. We may recall bk. 1, ll. 570–7 concerning "thundering Aetna" and "Mineral fury."

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) writes that although justice might now be obscured by persecution, "justice will then be clearly manifested, which now lies obscure" (*Commentary*, 3.755). Paul argues this in Phil. 1:28, so it is not peculiar to the Thessalonians. "Great advantage" will eventually emerge from their persecution (Rom. 8:18). The present and future experience is congruous with the nature of God and his faithfulness to his promises. "Worthiness" came from "free grace" (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8; v. 5; 755). The revelation of Christ (vv. 6–7) was parallel to Rom. 2:5. He called Christ's coming a "manifestation" (Greek, *epiphaneia*) or "unveiling, disclosure" (Greek, *apocalypsis*) in a number of places (756). Christ will be revealed with his angels (v. 8), who in Ps. 103:20 "excel in strength." The "fire of flame," a Hebraism denoting great wrath, "is the most dreadful of all the elements" (736). Whether the fire is material or metaphorical, "I leave to the Schoolmen." Vengeance is an act of justice. "The Gentiles" who are ignorant of God receive similar condemnation in Rom. 1:21. Poole suggested the aphorism: "The gospel hath not only promises to be believed, but precepts to be obeyed" (756). "Everlasting destruction," Poole asserted, "is not annihilation." It is elsewhere called "the second death" (Rev. 20:6). The oppressors will be punished in God's eternity. This is "punishment of loss and sense ... and ... separation" from God (756). Then Paul speaks (v. 10) of "a personal glory" of Christ and of "a mystical [glory] in his saints" (757).

## The Eighteenth Century

**Alexander Pope** (1688–1744), English poet, was born into a new era of confidence and optimism. He composed many literary works, including new translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. But in his last years, in 1741, he composed

*The Dunciad*. Bk. 4 is a conscious parody of, or satire on, a version of apocalyptic. All human activity comes to nothing and is inadequate, but the new age brings in not the kingdom of God, but a reign of dullness, stupidity, and chaos. The conclusion of book 4 of *The Dunciad* reads as follows:

In vain they gaze, turn giddy, rave, and die.  
 Religion, blushing, veils her sacred fires,  
 And unawares Morality expires.  
 Nor public Flame nor private, dares to shine;  
 Nor human Spark is left, nor Glimpse divine!  
 Lo! Thy dread Empire, Chaos! Is restored;  
 Light dies before thy uncreated word:  
 Thy hand, great Anarch! Lets the curtain fall;  
 And universal Darkness buries All.

(ll. 648–56)

Apocalyptic was now in decline, but had influenced the seventeenth century. Just as it flourishes in times of persecution and suffering, judgment and new creation tend to recede when there is prosperity or optimism.

The devout Anglican **Samuel Johnson** (1709–84), an even larger literary figure, in massive contrast to Pope, writes this prayer on the death of his wife (1752):

Almighty and most merciful Father, who lovest those whom thou Punishest, and turnest thine anger from the penitent ... grant that the affliction which it has pleased thee to bring upon me may awaken my conscience, and enforce my resolutions of a better life ... Grant, Lord, that I may not languish in fruitless and unavailing sorrow ... from whose hand all good and evil is received ... and when it shall please thee to call me from this mortal state, resign myself into thy hands with faith and confidence.

**Jonathan Edwards** (1703–58), American Puritan theologian and philosopher, wrote *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, variously dated in 1735 and 1741. He begins with a reference to 1 Thess. 2:14–16, and comments about the last day: “Wrath will then be executed without any merciful circumstances ... The wrath which will come upon them [the wicked], when they have filled up the measure of their sin, will not be in the nature of warnings ... That wrath which sinners will suffer after death will do them no good” (2). “The wrath will be so great as wholly to abolish all manner of welfare (Matt. 21:44)” (3). He adds, “Therefore it behoves all to haste and flee for their lives, to get into a safe condition ... though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea” (3). Edwards’s *The Portion of the Wicked* (1735) is a similar sermon from Rom. 2: 8–9. The wicked inherit “indignation and wrath, and misery” (1). “The separate

souls of the wicked ... shall be in amazing fear of their more full punishment at the day of judgement. Their punishment ... will be exceedingly dreadful” (2). Edwards mellowed in his later years, when he assesses critically the results of the Great Awakening.

**John Wesley** (1703–91) comments that God’s judgment is righteous, even if human beings view it otherwise (*Notes*, 2.697). Although he “rained brimstone and fire” in Gen. 19:24, we simply do not know what will be the final fate of those who remain in ignorance of him. This passage refers “chiefly to the Jews, who had heard the gospel” (697). Yet in v. 9 punishment has no end: “They must of necessity, therefore, be cut off from all good, and all possibility of it” (697). As for God’s people, “The wonderful glory of Christ shall shine in them” (698). **Charles Wesley**, his brother (1707–88) is famed for the Advent hymn (1758):

Lo! He comes with clouds descending,  
Once for favoured sinners slain;  
Thousand thousand Saints attending,  
Swell the triumph of his train.  
Alleluia,  
God appears on earth to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him  
Robed in dreadful majesty;  
Those who set at naught and sold him,  
Pierced and nailed him to the tree;  
Deeply wailing,  
Shall the true Messiah see.

**Isaac Watts** (1674–1748) wrote “How bright these glorious spirits shine,” which refers to the last times. The second verse closely matches 2 Thess. 1:5–12:

Lo! These are they from sufferings great,  
Who came to realms of light;  
And in the blood of Christ have washed  
Those robes which shine so bright.

**John Newton** (1725–1807), a slave master who converted to the Christian faith (1748), was influenced by George Whitefield, and became vicar of Olney. The majority of his letters, treatises, and hymns concern various aspects of evangelical devotion and personal life, rather than eschatology. But several hymns warn of God’s judgment. For example:

Destruction’s dang’rous road,  
What multitudes pursue!

While that which leads the soul to God  
Is known or sought by fear ...

Lord, open sinners' eyes,  
Their awful state to see;  
And make them ere the storm arise,  
To thee for safety flee.

(*Olney Hymns* 77, *Works*, 3.628)

## The Nineteenth Century

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839), professor of New Testament exegesis at Königsberg and Erlangen, notes that Paul saw the readers' patience and faith in the face of persecution as evidence of God's judgment, "not in order to destroy them, but in order to perfect them, and so make them worthy of God's kingdom" (*Commentary*, 439). The judicial action of God is described in detail in vv. 6–10. Justice is seen in terms of *jus talionis*. Christ's future coming (v. 8) also occurred in 1 Thess. 3:12 and 4:16, accompanied by angels. He compares Exod. 3:2 and Dan. 7:9, commenting on v. 9, "*This is the only passage in St. Paul's Epistles in which everlasting damnation is openly declared*" (442; my emphasis). Paul let "everlasting damnation retire to the background" (442). The concept of rewarding the faithful (v. 10) occurs in Rom. 9:23, "Everything serves the end of manifesting the glory of God" (443). Like Schleiermacher, who influenced him, Olshausen speaks of "the figurative language of the Apocalypse, also parallel to this passage" (441). But the universal and cosmic sweep, together with a focus on judgment and angels, mark this as apocalyptic language. Coming "in power" means "in a powerful, efficacious manner" (445).

**Robert Browning** (1812–89) speaks of judgment and new creation in his poem "Easter Day" (1850). This comes from his Italian period and reflects Elizabeth Browning's Catholic influence. "Easter Day" is the most "religious" of his poems, focusing the sovereignty and omnipotence of a Christlike God. He writes:

All is come to pass  
Such shows are over for each soul  
They had respect to. In the roll  
Of judgement which convinced mankind  
Of sin, stood many, bold and blind,  
Terror must burn the truth into,  
Their fate for them! – Thou hast to do  
With absolute omnipotence,  
Able its judgments to dispense,  
To the whole race, as every one,

Were its sole object. Judgement done,  
 God is, thou art – the rest is hurled  
 To nothingness for thee. This world ...  
 To Heaven and to Infinity.

(“Easter Day,” ll. 27–32)

Browning concludes:

Has God abolished at a blow  
 This world, wherein His saints were pent – ...  
 As Paradise gives proof ...  
 Love lay within it and without,  
 To clasp thee – but in vain! Thy soul  
 Still shrunk from him who made the whole ...  
 Still set deliberate aside  
 His love! Now take love!

(ll. 186–7, 194, 296–300)

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93) published his commentary in 1859. He compared the logic of Paul’s argument with that in Romans 11 and in Phil. 1:28. He also noted the apocalyptic overtones, which reach a climax in 2 Thess. 2:3–12, and found parallels in Isa. 2:10, 19, 21; 19:6; and 30:27; as well as part-borrowings from Ezekiel and Daniel (*Thessalonians*, 157). The visionary aspect vv. 8–10 embodied the “vision of ... ‘things that eye hath not seen’” (158). In v. 10 the coming of Christ is related to Zech. 14:5 and Jude 14.

**James Denney** (1856–1917) provided a meditation on 2 Thess. 1:5–12, which he calls “Suffering and Glory” (*Thessalonians*, 288–302). It may seem, he asserted, that life brings many injustices, but God is just. Suffering cannot be an end in itself. Jesus said, “Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you and persecute you ... for My sake; rejoice and be exceedingly glad ...” (290). For Paul, sharing the tribulations of Christ was an inspiration, sharing also with martyrs and confessors (293). One can learn sympathy with others who suffer. We await the revelation of Christ (294). Ignorance of God and disobedience to the gospel were respective characteristics of unbelieving Gentiles and Jews (297). But the gospel is “God’s last word to men” (299). The final ruin is separation from God. Denney, however, leaves a hint that for Christians the experience of “suffering and glory” had some relation to what Paul will later describe as dying and being raised with Christ.

**W. Bornemann** (d. 1858) suggested that vv. 7b–10 represented an early Christian psalm (*Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, 329, 336–44). He cited numerous parallel texts from the Old Testament, including Isa. 61:2; 66:4–10, 14ff.; Jer. 28:6, 24, 56. He commented, “Together they show how firmly all the individual expressions and thoughts of our section exactly ... belong to different places of the Old Testament” (338).

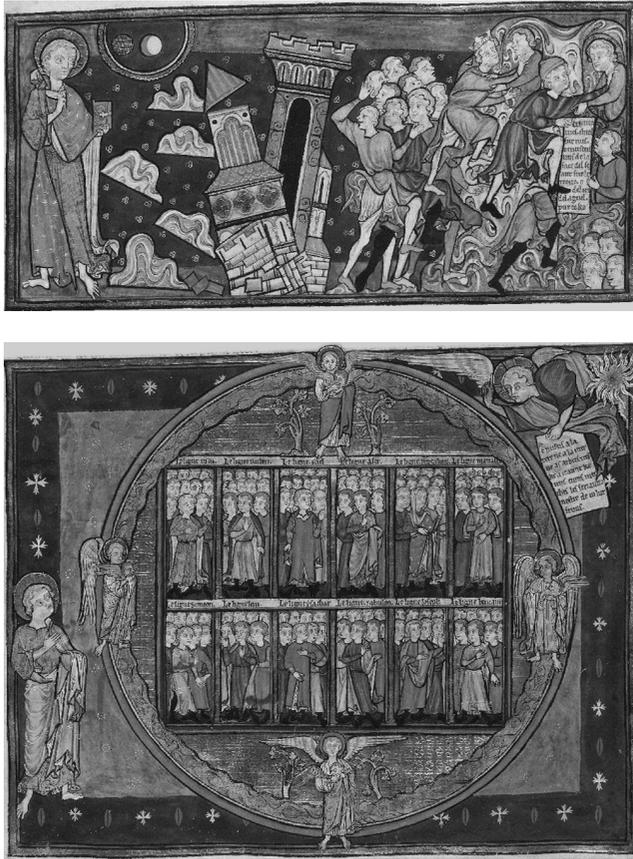
# 2 Thessalonians

2:1–12

## The Day of the Lord

### Introduction and Overview of 2 Thess. 2:1–12

The imagery of apocalyptic is not confined to 2 Thessalonians or to the earliest epistles of Paul. The later epistles contain future eschatology also (see Lowe, “An Examination of Attempts to Detect Developments in St. Paul’s Theology.”). Apocalyptic flourished around 300 years from persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC to the destruction of the Jewish nation by Hadrian in AD 135. Revelation 20, particularly vv. 4–10, reflects an apocalyptic and millenarian theme. 1 Cor. 15:20–28 draws on such imagery. Many cite sections of



*Figure 1* The Trinity College Apocalypse: The Sixth Scroll of Rev. 6:12–14, with earthquake, black sun, and red moon (with thanks to the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge).

Matthew 24 and Mark 13; parts of 2 Peter and Jude; and the Jewish writings 4 Ezra 7:26–33, and 2 Apoc. Baruch 29 and 30. That Paul uses apocalyptic imagery does not of itself indicate that he digresses from what is important to him. We cited in the Introduction the arguments of Klaus Koch, J. Christiaan Beker, J. Louis Martyn, and Alexandra Brown, that apocalyptic thought readily characterizes Paul, and that much is lost from Christianity today if we neglect this theme. In reception history, many church fathers embraced apocalyptic, except Tyconius, Jerome, and, generally, Augustine. It reached a peak in the run-up to around AD 1000. Many reformers and seventeenth-century writers firmly drew on it; and some “rediscovered” it in the twentieth century.

## The Advent of Christ and the “Man of Sin” (2 Thess. 2:1–6a); Note on the Antichrist

### Introduction and Overview

Paul expresses the pastoral thrust of the passage: “Do not be quickly shaken in mind” (v. 2). The readers must use their minds to work out that the Parousia could not “be already here.” Although its timing is unknown, certain events must take place first. This is not self-contradictory. We have seen that the timing of a birth may come as a surprise, but the breaking of waters and labor pains come first. Robert Jewett emphasizes Paul’s insistence on using the *mind* (Greek, *nous*). He writes, “It may be that as pneumatic enthusiasts they were sometimes “out of their mind”” (Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms*, 369; see also 358–90). Paul elsewhere appeals to reason and rationality. He notes that the Galatians are “bewitched” (373–4). Paul states in v. 3 that the Thessalonians had been deceived. “The rebellion” comes first.

What is “the rebellion”? Many conclude that this is not a political revolt against Rome, but a religious revolt against God (see Ernst, *Die eschatologischen Gegenspieler in den Schriften der Neuen Testaments*, 27–30 and Giblin, *The Threat to Faith*, 206ff.). The rebellion and the revelation of the “man of lawlessness” seem to be public events. Forces of evil had hitherto worked behind the scenes, but immediately before the Parousia they will become exposed as what they are to public view. Other apocalyptic literature uses such imagery (see Jubilees 23:14–27; 4 Ezra 5:1–2; *The Assumption of Moses* 5). Paul uses the Old Testament and sources in Judaism more decisively than “Hellenistic” sources.

Beda Rigaux makes three helpful points (*Saint Paul*, 195–234). First, Paul holds a *cosmic* perspective (195). More is at stake than an uncritical borrowing of apocalyptic imagery. Second, divine intervention and *new creation* remain central in the apocalyptic drama. Third, apocalyptic depends on belief in *revelation*. Some aspects of apocalyptic are said to be un-Pauline. But Gal. 4:30 speaks of a day of redemption; Romans 9:22 speaks of destruction; and most of the Pauline writings speak of a dual experience of tribulation and the Holy Spirit during the intermediate time before the day of the Lord (Rigaux, *Saint Paul*, 213–22).

### Note on the Antichrist

The figure of the Antichrist receives mention in the New Testament only in 1 John 2: 18, 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7. In 2:18 the term occurs both in the singular and the plural. It may serve as a corporate term for “many deceivers.” In v. 22, it

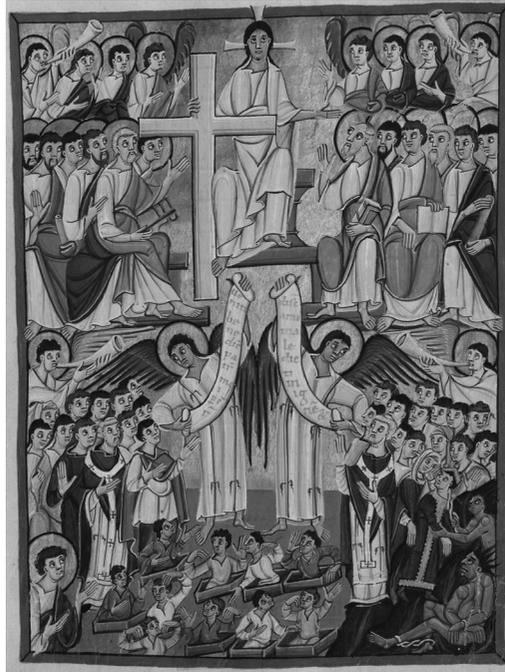


Figure 2 Bamberg Apocalypse: Christ in majesty as Judge, setting out for the final battle, with the praise from angels with trumpets, and elders in heaven (early 11th century) (with thanks to Staatsbibliothek Bamberg; Msc. Bibl. 140, fol. 53r; photo: Gerald Raab).

denotes those who deny Christ. The term does not occur explicitly in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, but *Didachē* 16:3–4 speaks of “false prophets” in “the last days,” and of “the deceiver” who will do signs, although the Greek does not explicitly call this “Antichrist.”

(1) The next mention of this figure comes in Irenaeus (c.130–c.200), *Against Heresies* 3.16.5–6, which refers to 1 John 2:18 (ANF 1.442), and also expounds this as the summing up or recapitulation (*anakephalaiōsis*) of evil (25.2–3; ANF 1.553–4). Irenaeus discusses the name “Antichrist” in 30.1 (ANF 1.558–9). After Irenaeus many of the church fathers refer more regularly to the Antichrist, including Hippolytus, Tertullian, Origen, Commodianus, and Lactantius, before Nicaea. After Nicaea, they include Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom, Pelagius, and Jerome, while Tyconius and Augustine of Hippo in general favor a more “spiritual” interpretation of the Antichrist, broadly like Origen, or one which addresses the present.

(2) Hippolytus (c.170–236) writes *On Christ and the Antichrist* in about 200. This figure is the counterpart to Christ. As Christ is a lion, so the Antichrist has the appearance of a lion; as Christ is King, so the Antichrist appears as a king; as Christ is a Lamb, so the Antichrist seems to be a lamb, but inwardly is a wolf in sheep's clothing. "The Lord sent apostles ... he in like manner will send false apostles ... The Saviour appeared in the form of a man, so he too will come in the form of a man." He will also raise a temple in Jerusalem (*On Christ and the Antichrist* 6; ANF 5.206).

(3) Tertullian (c.160–235) reflects a broadly similar approach. In his work *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* he cites 2 Thess. 2:1–7 and 8–10, foretelling the coming of the Antichrist as "the son of perdition ... who exalts himself ... above God" (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 24; ANF 3.563).

(4) Origen (c. 185–253) adopts a different approach, partly anticipating Tyconius and Augustine. He quotes the whole of 2 Thess. 2:1–12, and comments that the prophecy concerning the Antichrist similarly occurs in Dan. 8:23–5 and 9:27 (LXX; *Against Celsus* 6.46; ANF 4.594–5). He refers to "the lie," citing 2 Thess. 2:8 (*Commentary on John* 2.4; ANF 10.326). The spiritual battle, however, belongs to the present.

(5) By contrast, Commodianus (fl. c. 250) reflects world-historical apocalyptic, seeing Antichrist as "Nero ... raised from hell," allied to "the whore Babylon," and as advancing on Jerusalem (*The Instructions of Commodianus* 41; see 42–5; ANF 4.211–12).

(6) Lactantius (250–c. 325) similarly reflects this apocalyptic perspective. He compares the first and the last times of the world, foreseeing a time of desolation, and a change of empires (*The Divine Institutes* 7.14–16; ANF 7.211–13, c. 312). At the end a false prophet will appear, heralding the persecution of the faithful (7.17). The Antichrist will then come, modeled upon the actions of Jupiter and Hermes, and predicted by the Sibyls. He will oppress believers: "Now this is he who is called Antichrist; but he shall falsely call himself Christ, and shall fight against the truth" (7.19; ANF 7.215; see 20–6, on judgment, the renewal of the world, and the resurrection).

(7) After Nicaea, Cyril of Jerusalem (315–68) took up the concept of the Antichrist in his *Catechetical Lectures*, stressing the magician-like qualities of the Antichrist, who would be skilled in evil, and would seek to rebuild the destroyed Jewish Temple (2 Thess. 2:4; *Catechetical Lectures* 15.14, 17; NPNF2 7.108; see 4.15; 15.33; NPNF2 7.22, 114). The Antichrist is expected by the Jews (*Catechetical Lectures* 12.2; NPNF2 7.72). Satan shall dwell in him: "Satan has used him as an instrument" (*Lectures* 15.14; NPNF2 7.108). He is virtually the Devil.

(8) Tyconius (d. c. 395) anticipates the approach of Jerome and Augustine. We discuss him in detail later. He tended to see the Antichrist as a present movement of evil within the church. His purist Donatist roots make this more

plausible. Jerome (345–420) refers to 2 Thess. 2:3–10, but relates it to the warnings of Matt. 24:19, and takes both to refer to the present (*Letter* 123.16; NPNF2 6.236). He also refers apocalyptic imagery to present persecution (*Against the Pelagians* 1.2; NPNF2 6.449). As Antichrist, the Devil is active now.

(9) John Chrysostom writes, “Antichrist shall appear, after whom is the end” (*The Gospel of St. Matthew*, Homily 87.2; NPNF1 10.464) but does not elaborate on this. But he expands on it more fully in his *Homily* on 2 Thess. 2:4. He shall do “numberless mischiefs,” but he is not Satan, “but some man” though Satan works in him (*Homilies on Thessalonians* 3; NPNF1 13.386). “The mystery of lawlessness” denotes “the type of Antichrist” (*Homilies on Thessalonians* 4; NPNF1 13.389). He adds, “The Jews will fall into the hands of the Antichrist” (*Homilies on Hebrews* 33; NPNF1 14.515).

(10) Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–c. 428) comments on the Antichrist in connection with 2 Thess. 2:4 (*In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, 2.50). The Antichrist is an individual man, but an instrument of Satan. Like the pre-Nicene fathers, Theodore sees a parallel with the Incarnation: just as the Holy Spirit indwelt Jesus in the flesh, so Satan indwells the human Antichrist.

(11) Pelagius (c. 360–c. 430) also uses 2 Thess. 3–10 as a starting point. He comments, “Unless the Antichrist comes, Christ will not come” (*Expositions*, 443). But the Antichrist is not a man, but the Devil (*diabolica excogitare astutia*, subtle devices of the Devil). The son of perdition – “to be sure, the Devil” (*Diaboli scilicet*).

(12) In his long *Letter* 199 to Hesychius, Augustine (354–430) congratulates his fellow bishop for longing for the return of Christ (ch. 1), but insists on Paul’s advice not to be moved out of one’s mind (ch. 2). The Christian’s attitude should be to watch (ch. 3). Augustine cites the words of Jesus: “It is not for you to know the times” (ch. 4). Paul endorsed this (ch. 5; see 6–12). Augustine turns to Hesychius’s interpretation of the beasts in Daniel (chs. 13–14). He repeats, “Of that day and hour no one knows” (ch. 16), and “a thousand years . . . are but as a day” (chs. 17–20). The day comes nearer every day, and the last days will be “dangerous times” (ch. 22). There are signs of it (chs. 23–7). Augustine declares, “The abomination of the desolation referred to the siege of Jerusalem, not to the end of the world”; (*Letters* 165–203, FC, 30.379). He continues, “As to wars, when has the earth not been scourged by them?” (ch. 35, p. 384). It is “a better understanding” to apply all this to the church (ch. 39, p. 387). The proper attitude is that of vigilance, not of undue preoccupation with end events (chs. 42–5, pp. 390–3). Meanwhile, he says, seek to fill the world with the gospel, and to preach to all nations (chs. 46–54, pp. 388–401). We explain below that special circumstances concern Augustine’s untypical interest in end events in *City of God*, book 20.

Thus we find several distinct approaches, as follows. Among the 12 above: (1) Pelagius favors seeing the Antichrist as the Devil. (2) Theodore sees him as

an individual man, even if also the tool of Satan. (3) Irenaeus sees him as a man but also as a corporate figure, perhaps also as “powers.” (4) Hippolytus and Tertullian see him as the reverse replica or counterpart of Christ. (5) Cyril sees him as a magician-like being. (6) Origen, Tyconius, and Augustine view him more as a principle, applicable to the present and to all times.

If we consider also the Middle Ages, Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202) is the first of a long line to associate him with a triumphal pope. In the era of preparation for the Reformation, John Wycliffe (c. 1333–84) was still more emphatic about identifying the Antichrist with the pope or the papacy, or even with institutional church wealth and power (Wycliffe, *Pastoral Office*, 11–17, pp. 40–5; see also Wycliffe, *On Apostasy: On the Pope’s Power*). John Huss (1371–1415) sees the Antichrist as the pope himself as an individual man (*On Simony* 2.4, 5, and 7, pp. 200, 212, 223, 232–3). Martin Luther (1483–1546) insisted that the Antichrist was the papacy (*Luther’s Works*, 51.311; Luther, *Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist*, WA 6.597; see also McGinn, *Antichrist*, 201–8). Luther also extended the concept to the European threat of the Turks at that time. Philipp Melancthon followed Luther closely, but the English Reformer William Tyndale (c. 1495–1563) held a more “spiritual” view, and John Jewel (1522–71) dismissed medieval speculation as no more than speculation.

John Calvin (1509–64) clearly implies that the papacy is the Antichrist (*Institutes* 4.2.11; tr. Beveridge, 2.313) and is explicit also (*Institutes* 4.7.24–5; 384). However, he does not engage in Luther’s lengthy polemic. This view persisted among many Puritans and Protestants. We note below how violent this identification becomes in the case of Obe Philips (c. 1560) among the radical reformers, and in James Arminius (1560–1609). This approach persisted even into the eighteenth century, including Bengel. In Roman Catholic writers, including Estius, as we note, the Antichrist may be the Roman Empire of the “secessionist” (Protestant) church. In the nineteenth century the Antichrist played a smaller role, but still represented an oppressive figure who sought to rule the world, including Napoleon, and later Hitler and Stalin (see McGinn, *Antichrist*, 220–49). Thus to the six main approaches of the patristic era we may add the identification of the Antichrist with the papacy in Joachim, Wycliffe, Luther, and others, and eventually a broad waning of the idea, perhaps, though, until the rise of dispensationalism, especially in America (see note on 1 Thess. 4:13–17 above).

## The Apostolic Fathers and the Patristic Period

The *Didachē* (c. 80–120) quotes 1 Cor. 16:22: “Our Lord come” (*Didachē* 10.6), although many see the context as eucharistic. The *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 80–150) speaks of a “day” as 1,000 years, and a “day” when Christ will destroy the wicked,

“and will change the sun, the moon, and the stars” (v. 5; 15.4–5). **Justin the Apologist** (c. 100–c. 165) affirms the future resurrection and even a millennium in *Dialogue with Trypho* 80 (ANF 1.239). He speaks of Christ’s coming “from heaven with glory, when the man of apostasy (see v. 3), who “speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth against Christians” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 110; ANF 1.253–4).

**Irenaeus** (c. 130–c. 200) refers to a reward for persecuted believers, and to waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promises (*Against Heresies* 5.32.1–2; ANF 1.561). He refers to 2 Thess. 2:8 only in passing (*Against Heresies* 3.7.2). The real blossoming of apocalyptic, however, reappears in the third century. R. P. C. Hanson observes, “Realised eschatology in any formal sense has completely disappeared” (“Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church,” 431).

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) insists that Christians believe in the consummation of all things at the end, and especially in the Parousia, the last judgment and the resurrection of the body. It is entailed in Christ’s death and resurrection (Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, esp. ch. 24). He explicitly quotes 1 Thess. 1:9–10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13–17; 5:1–31; and Cor. 15:19. When he turns to 2 Thess. 2:1–10, he quotes this in full. He declares that Marcion has absurdly erased 2 Thessalonians from his canon, to serve Marcion’s system of belief (*Against Marcion* 5.16; ANF 3.463–4). Paul refers, by contrast, to “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and . . . our gathering together to him” as a firm article of faith, in contrast to a letter from false apostles, which is designed to unsettle the Thessalonian church by suggesting that the day of the Lord has somehow already occurred. He sees *no contradiction between the theme in 1 Thessalonians* that it will occur as a sudden surprise, and the insistence in 2 Thessalonians that certain events *must take place first*, such as the revealing of the “man of sin.” Our text does not speak of Antichrist, but Tertullian asserts, “That is to say, the Antichrist” (ch. 24; ANF 3.563). Tertullian records, “If . . . there is an eclipse or an earthquake, or famine or plague, men cry, “Christians to the lions” (*Apology* 40). Shortly he comes to vv. 8–10, where “the Restrainer” is the Roman state.

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) quotes 2 Thess. 2:1–12 in full (*Against Celsus* 6.46.1–2; ANF 4.594). Celsus rejects the statements concerning the Antichrist material in Daniel, and 2 Thess. 2: 3–4 (*Against Celsus* 6.45.1), as well as Christ’s words. For Origen, the Antichrist is a *corporate group* of individuals, as in 1 John, “in whom evil is deeply ingrained” (45). They represent an extreme of evil, and sometimes do “lying miracles,” through cooperation with the devil. They deceive the human race. Origen discusses the “man of sin, the son of perdition who . . . exalts himself above all . . . so that he sits in the temple of God . . .” (vv. 3–4; Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.50; ANF 4.450–1). On vv. 6–12, he claims again that Celsus falsifies the words of Jesus. Celsus, he claims, has a superficial view of



overthrown ... by continual earthquakes ... waters ... frequent diseases and repeated famines ... Waters shall be changed into blood ... Prodiges shall confound the minds of men ... comets, the darkness of the sun, the colour of the moon, and ... falling stars" (*Divine Institutes* 16). The trumpet from heaven sounds, and all tremble. Lactantius quotes 2 Thessalonians 2: at the close of the times a great prophet is sent by God, who will work wonders, but turn people to God. But another being shall come from Syria, who will bring destruction. He will be "a prophet of lies" and will call himself God, ordering his worship (*Institutes* 17; ANF 7.214). This clearly is apocalyptic in tone.

**Athanasius** (c. 296–373) insists that Christians should avoid undue speculation about the last things (*Four Discourses against the Arians* 1.13.54). This is true to 2 Thess. 2:1–12, especially vv. 2–5. Athanasius has a parallel version in 3.28.49 (NPNF2 4.338 and 420–1), arguing that ignorance of future timings is good.

**Basil of Caesarea** (c. 330–379) writes that he has heard of serious persecution in Egypt. The enemy of the church, he says, saw that Christianity expanded under open persecution, and hence changed his tactics to "secret snares," including plunder and torture. Paul speaks of the "son of perdition ... who exalts himself ... and is worshipped" (v. 4; Basil, *Letter 139 to the Alexandrians* 1; NPNF2 8.203). Whether the end comes or not, God's people need endurance, and need not to lose heart, to "await the revelation from heaven." Even if the transformation of creation has already begun, the Christian's task is to remain faithful.

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) adheres closely to the text. The readers must not make assumptions about the day of the Lord too readily, especially on the basis of some forged letter or prophecy. They must not be deceived by the devil. Before the coming of Christ, the Antichrist will come, who is associated with the "failure" of (*defectio*, possibly "rebellion in") the Roman Empire. "Rome will falter, then the Antichrist will come" (*Commentarius*, 239–40; see Hughes, *Constructing Antichrist*, 43). The Antichrist will then take his seat in the house of the Lord, and claim to be God (2 Thess. 2:2–4). He is a "supernatural" figure. Ambrosiaster sees no contradiction between 1 and 2 Thessalonians. For imminence does not exclude certain "signs" coming first.

**Tyconius** (d. c. 400), probably of Carthage, belonged neither to the Donatists nor to the Catholic Church. He cites 2 Thessalonians in eight places. He seeks to move beyond the historical or "human" sense of the text to a "mystical" sense. He anticipates Augustine in offering a radically "*spiritual*" sense to apocalyptic imagery. The Antichrist stands for a *corporate* reality. 2 Thessalonians as a whole refers to the present-day church, and does not relate to a future sequence. The "man of sin" is a body of sin *within the church*. The Antichrist consists of unbelievers who claim to represent the true church of God. While the Son of Man

builds the temple of the people of God, the “man of sin” builds a false temple. Tyconius regularly appeals to 2 Thessalonians, where he does not deny a future last day, but his main interest lies in the present. His “Rule 3” alludes explicitly to 2 Thess. 2:3, and “Rule 4” concerns supernatural opposition to the church (Tyconius, *Liber regularum*, tr. as *The Book of Rules*, esp. 1.3, 10–14; 2.10; 4.88; 6.108–11; see also Hughes, *Constructing the Antichrist*, 84–94).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) declares, “When the resurrection will be, he has not said ... He and all his saints will certainly appear with us ... The resurrection and our gathering together ... will happen at the same time. He [Paul] raises up their minds: ‘that you be not shaken’” (citing 2 Thess. 2:1–2; Chrysostom, *Homily 3* on 2 Thessalonians; NPNF1 13.386). Paul’s phrase “by spirit” (v. 2) refers to a false prophecy, while “by word” (v. 2) refers to a forged letter. Chrysostom next expounds the Antichrist (v. 3). He calls him “Apostasy” because he causes many to fall away, and performs “numberless mischief.” Is “the son of perdition” Satan? Chrysostom replies, “By no means; but some man,” even if Satan works within him. He will be “a kind of opponent to God” (*Hom. 3*), abolishing all gods, and placing himself on God’s throne. He will be seated in the temple of God, not only in Jerusalem, “but in every church.” Paul concedes that he has already said this (v. 5), but “it is necessary continually to say the same things” (see 1 Thess. 3:4). People are too easily distracted, and tempted to glory in earthly vanity.

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–428) composed his commentaries on Paul in c. 410–15. In 2:1–12 he sees no contradiction with the First Epistle, but the need to correct the view that some consider the day of the Lord to have already arrived. False prophecy and a forged letter aggravated this, and Paul urges the need for extreme caution (*vehementius eos cautos facere volens adicit*). Theodore insists that “our gathering to him” (2:1) remains future (*Commentarii*, 48–9). Hence Paul sees the need to write a second letter. Before the coming of Christ, the Antichrist will come (vv. 3–4). The “lawless one” is indeed human. Theodore writes, “He will be a man, with a demon working everything in him, just as God in the Word seems to have performed all things in that “man who was assumed for our salvation” (*Commentarii*, 50–1). The “Antichrist,” as an antitype of Christ, will attempt to imitate whatever Christ has done, trying to be “Christ” to everyone (v. 4), “as if he himself were to be Christ, and on account of this he ought to be worshipped by everyone in the manner of God” (*quasi quia ipse sit Christus et propter hoc debeat ab omnibus adorari in ordinem Dei*; 52). Theodore explains that “man of sin” shows that “he will serve sin, and his cause will appear before many” (51).

**Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430) often follows Ambrosiaster. In 2 Thess. 2:1–12 he correlates Paul with the “little apocalypse” of Matthew 24, showing their common elements. The false notion that the day of the Lord has already

come is exactly like those false prophets who, Jesus says, will say, “Behold, here is Christ” (Matt. 24:23; Pelagius, *Expositions* 443). “Unless the Antichrist comes, Christ will not come” (443). As we noted above on the Antichrist, Pelagius observes, “The revelation of the man of sin, namely [Paul means] the devil” (v. 3; 443). “The rebellion” may mean the departure (*discessio*) or flight (*refuge*) of the nations from Roman rule. Daniel’s reference to the beasts might suggest this (Dan. 7:24). Pelagius repeats Paul’s words in v. 4, adding that he will try to restore the Temple in Jerusalem together with reestablishing all the Jewish laws (*Expositions*, 444). He will try to convince the Jews that he is the Christ.

**Jerome** (c. 345–420) stands out as one of the most learned of the church fathers in biblical studies. As well as producing the Latin Vulgate, he wrote many commentaries. He considered many opinions, sometimes even tying together inconsistent interpretations. With Augustine, he resisted the millenarian extremes of an exegesis which owed much to apocalyptic. But on the other side, he believed in realistic apocalyptic speculation. In c. 406 he wrote a letter to Algasia, treating questions in 2 Thessalonians on the Antichrist theme (Jerome, *Letter* 121; summarized in NPNF2 6.224.11). Jerome believes that 2 Thess. 2:1–12 was written precisely to correct misunderstandings which had arisen from careless reading of 1 Thessalonians, and the forged letter. Jerome imagines that any obscurity on Paul’s part was to protect the church against unnecessary persecution. The “man of sin” is the son of the devil. Like Theodore, he sees the man of sin as seeking worship by trying to establish a restored temple either in Jerusalem or even within the church. He tries to mimic Christ, but Christ will destroy him. Jerome uses elements from Hippolytus, Ambrosiaster, and Theodore, and the Antichrist becomes “the inversion of Christ in all his actions” (Hughes, *Constructing the Antichrist*, 77).

**Augustine** (354–430) regarded the “spiritual” tradition of Tyconius with favor. He argues that while *literal* signs are not to be understood as if they were *figurative*, *figurative signs must not be interpreted literally*. He then formulates “rules” for discerning the difference (*On Christian Doctrine* 3.10–29; NPNF1 2.560–8), and expounds the seven “rules” of Tyconius as deserving attention (3.30–7; NPNF1 2.568–73). He turns to 2 Thessalonians not in the context of writing a commentary, but as part of his philosophy of history in *The City of God* 20. Following the Goths’ sack of Rome in 410, many high-born Romans fled to North Africa with implied accusations against Constantinian Christianity for bringing about the failure of the empire. *The City of God* was largely a refutation of these allegations. Where past patristic writers had seen the demise of Rome as an event of future eschatology, for Augustine it had become a present historical event (*City of God* 1–4).

Christians belong not primarily to the city of Rome, which is earthly and transitory, but to the city of heaven, built upon God (bks. 11–17). The heavenly city entails traveling towards it as a pilgrim. Meanwhile, the two cities are commingled. At the day of the Lord, a final and visible separation between them will occur (bks. 18–22). Augustine’s discussion of 2 Thessalonians appears in 20.19. Augustine speaks of the following: the last judgment (20.1–2, 4–5); the commingling of events for good and bad (20.3); the expectation of resurrection (20.6); the millennium (20.7); the binding and loosing of the devil (20.8); the reign of the saints (20.9); persecution provoked by the devil when he is loosed at the end (20.11); the millennium and the Antichrist (20.13); the damnation of the devil (20.14) the resurrection of the dead (20.15); the new heaven and the new earth (20.16); the eternal glory of the church (20.17); and the testimony of Peter and Paul to the end events (20.18–20). Bk. 20 concludes with further references to Isaiah, Daniel, the Psalms, and Malachi (20.21–30).

For most of his life, Augustine emphasized the present state of the church. He never resorted to predicting an eschatological timetable. Like Chrysostom, he urged that one does not err if one fails to know something (Augustine, *Letters*, 199). 2 Thess. 2:1–12 is obscure in its precise meaning (see note on Antichrist above). But in *City of God* Augustine reflects on more eschatological matters. Bk. 20 became a strong influence on the Middle Ages. He wishes “on no account omit what the Apostle Paul says in writing to the Thessalonians” (*City of God* 20.19). “No one can doubt that he wrote this of the Antichrist and of the day of judgement” (20.19). But it is uncertain “in what temple he shall sit.” The Antichrist includes “the mass of men who adhere to him, along with their prince” (20.19). He discusses possible allusions to Nero and to Rome, but regards these as no more than audacious speculations. He cites 1 John 2:16, 19, for a view of “many antichrists,” both now and in the future. Hughes comments, “Augustine marshals Tyconian principles to break down the authority of eschatological exegesis” (Hughes, *Constructing Antichrist*, 106).

## The Medieval Period

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 768–856) studied under Alcuin, and provided many extracts from the church fathers in his work on Paul. In the Carolingian era of the Middle Ages, Rabanus Maurus, Florus of Lyons, and Haimo of Auxerre represent three traditions of interpreting the apocalyptic expectation in 2 Thess. 2:1–12. Rabanus largely depends on Theodore of Mopsuestia. Florus draws mainly on Augustine, Jerome, and Pelagius. Haimo works constructively

with Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, and Augustine (Hughes, *Constructing Antichrist*, 125). Rabanus's commentaries on the epistles of Paul probably date to the period 820–840.

About three-quarters of Rabanus's commentary on 2 Thessalonians repeats Theodore virtually verbatim, only injecting some comments from Augustine, Jerome, and others. He follows Gregory in believing that 2 Thess. 2:1–12 constitutes Paul's central reason for writing this Second Epistle. The Antichrist is "He who denies that Christ is God" (PL 112.572B). It may also denote all who fall away from Christian faith. Rabanus sees no difficulty in sometimes combining incompatible interpretations. Hence he gives a literal or realist interpretation of apocalyptic imagery; yet also follows the "spiritual" interpretation found in Augustine (except for *City of God* 20). The Antichrist is mainly a historical figure, such as an oppressive ruler.

**Haimo of Auxerre** (c. 810–c. 875) represents a different exegetical tradition, and although for many years this suffered from undue neglect. He remains perhaps the most impressive biblical exegete of the ninth century. He was heir to the tradition of Irish scholarship, with Alcuin and Rabanus. 2 Thess. 2:1 opens with the comment, "We read of two comings of the Lord, the first in humility, the second in power, when he will come in judgement" (Haimo, *Second Thessalonians*, 24). The reference to the Spirit in Paul (v. 2) constitutes a warning that "the Day of the Lord is imminent," leading to undue fear. The "word" (v. 2) is a written warning based on an interpretation of Isaiah and Daniel. Paul explains that the second coming and last judgment cannot occur until "every kingdom ... deserts the reign and authority of the Romans" (*Second Thessalonians*, 25). Further, "the man of sin" (v. 3) is the Antichrist who, though he is a man, will be the source of all sins ... the son of the devil" (25). Haimo adds, "Antichrist will extol himself above everything which is called 'God,' that is, above all the gods of the Gentiles: Hercules, for example, and Apollo and Jove ... and above all the elect, who are formally called 'gods'" (Exod. 22:28; v. 4; 25). He sees "the mystery of iniquity" (v. 7) as persecution begun by Nero, and continued by Diocletian and Julian the Apostate.

**Agobard of Lyons** (fl. 816–840), in his *Sermon*, known more widely as *On the Truth of the Faith*, quotes 2 Thess. 2:1–12 in full (14; in McCracken and Cabaniss (eds.), *Early Mediaeval Theology*, 348). Agobard gives a ringing declaration of "The faith and hope of the Catholic church" (14). He encourages the church to make a bold confession in the face of the growing tide of paganism, and refers to Paul's assurance of the destruction of the Antichrist. He likewise quotes Daniel and Revelation (Dan. 7:25–7; 8:9–12, 23–5; 11:36–37; Rev. 13:1–7, 11–14; 17:7–14; 19:19–21; 20:7–10). His sermon draws heavily on apocalyptic texts. He concludes with a quotation from

Malachi: “For behold, the day will come, burning like an oven, and all the arrogant and evildoers will be stubble ... You shall tread down the wicked” (3:18–4:3; *Sermon* 28; McCracken and Cabaniss (eds.), *Early Mediaeval Theology*, 361–2).

**Thietland of Einsiedeln** (c. 900–965) draws on Haimo and Augustine. “The rebellion” in 2 Thess. 2:3 is predictably “a departure of the nations from the Roman Empire” (*On 2 Thessalonians*, 51). The Antichrist is a true *man*. It is “uncertain” whether the temple refers to a ruin of Solomon’s temple, or to the church (52). “Man of sin” means not only the Antichrist, but “the entire mass of evil people belonging to his body” (52). Hughes observes, “The early Middle Ages saw the integration of apocalyptic traditions into a synthetic eschatological vision, ambiguous about the end, but powerful” (*Constructing the Antichrist*, 177). More generally, with the passing of the year 1000, apocalypticism tended to fade, so that we find little apocalyptic as such in Anselm, Bernard, or Abelard, although we do find material on the last judgment. Exceptions included: (1) Lanfranc, who repeats patristic sources about the day of the Lord; (2) Bruno the Carthusian, who writes on apocalyptic; and (3) Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln (c. 1170–1253) who denounced the papacy, with its abuses, as Antichrist.

**Anselm of Canterbury** (c. 1033–1109) writes of Jesus: “The same is my Judge between whose hands I tremble. Take heart, sinner, do not despair. ... Have mercy, Jesus, while the time of mercy lasts, lest in time of judgment you condemn” (“Meditation 1,” *Prayers and Meditations*, 224).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) makes some reference to 2 Thess. 2:1–12 (*Summa Theologiae* 1, qu. 113, art. 4; qu. 114, art. 4; see Bornemann, “Geschichte der Deutung von 2 Thess. 2:1–12,” *Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, 402–5). Aquinas holds a more individualist view than the cosmic perspective of apocalyptic (*Summa Theologiae* 1, qu. 76, art. 1; see 1, qu. 77, art. 8). For Thomas, the “end” culminates in the vision of God (see *Super primam epistolam ad Corinthos Lectura*, on 1 Corinthians 15). The *Summa Theologiae*, however, also has several references to the Antichrist and to false miracles, and many to good and evil angels. Thomas considers “Whether Daemons Can Lead Men Astray by Real Miracles.” It seems that only God can perform true miracles, but according to 2 Thessalonians 2, the Antichrist performs “lying miracles” (1, qu. 114, art. 4, ad. 1). For example, he may deceive the senses. Thomas argues that the Antichrist may use natural reason (1, qu. 113, art. 4, ad. 3). He asks whether the Antichrist is head of the wicked, in the same way as Christ is head of the church, and quotes 2 Thess. 2:4, “He will show himself as if he were God” (3, qu. 8, art. 8). He cites a medieval gloss to the effect that he can be “the fulness of evil,” as Christ is “the fulness of God.” He further explores the Antichrist and lying miracles (2.2, qu. 178, art. 1).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) refers to “the man of sin” and “son of perdition” in 2 Thess. 2:3 as “the papacy,” as we noted above. This is “the kingdom of Babylon and the real Antichrist” (*The Pagan Servitude of the Church* [1520], in *Selections*, 307). The Antichrist places himself “above all that God preached and worshipped (2:4) ... above the word and worship” (*The Bondage of the Will*, 10.170; WA 18.684). Luther’s concern, like Augustine, is with the present. Elsewhere he asserts that even now “Satan can make himself appear as if he were God” (2 Thess. 2:4; *Commentary on 1 Timothy* 373). When he encounters such a passage as 1 Cor. 15:35–57, his exegesis is directed to the future, but soberly, and with present implications (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 169–210; WA 36.630–92). Pelikan comments, “What made late medieval apocalypticism important doctrinally was the growing belief in this period that ‘the man of sin, the son of perdition’ (2 Thess. 2:3) was not some emperor (Nero or Frederick II) or some false prophet (Arius or Mohammed) but the visible head of Christendom” (Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 4.38).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) paraphrases v. 1: “As you set high a value on the coming of Christ ... I earnestly beseech you ... not to be too credulous ...” (*Commentary*, 83). Paul’s admonition was necessary because of the fickle activity of the “wily Satan” (84). The devil “masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). Paul tells his readers “not to believe every spirit” (1 John 4:1). The false teachers use false reason, conjecture, and pretexts. Does this contradict 1 Thessalonians? Calvin declares, “The solution is easy, for it is ‘at hand’ with regard to God, with whom one day is as a thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8)” (85). Calvin associates 2:3–4 with Matt. 24:1–25. Christ says, “The end is still to come” (v. 6). These are birth pangs. Misunderstanding this is a serious and “dangerous temptation,” making some readers “lose their footing” (86). The thrust of the passage applies to the present: “The teaching is not just for the benefit of the Thessalonians but for all godly people” (86).

This passage, Calvin urges, cannot refer to the collapse of the Roman Empire. “Apostasy” means a treacherous departure from God. It is “a general rebellion in the visible Church” (87). Calvin adds, “The contrived stories about Nero were no better than an old wives’ tale” (*Commentary*, 87). Setting up the “abomination” is what “we see accomplished in Popery” (87). The “man of lawlessness” causes “dreadful confusion,” and places his kingdom in direct opposition to Christ’s kingdom (88). The Antichrist transparently represents “the claims of the Pope” (89). The pope deceives, for “he contrives means of attaining salvation that are completely at variance with the teaching of the Gospel ... He transfers all divine power to himself ... he climbs on to God’s judgement seat”

(89). The very phrase that he uses, “Vicar of Christ” shows the meaning of taking his seat in the sanctuary of God (v. 4). Paul had given a warning before (v. 5), but now he repeats himself with gentleness. Calvin makes the same point in his *Institutes*. He writes, “We call the Roman Pontiff Antichrist.” The words in 2 Thess. 2:4 “cannot” have a different meaning ... “The Antichrist would sit in the temple of God” (*Institutes* 4.7.25).

**Estius** (1542–1613) writes at length on this passage in his *Commentarii*, 2: *D. Pauli Epistolae*, 604–11. Normally he is not polemical, but as a Catholic at the time of the Reformation, we should not expect him to avoid some reference to Luther (608). He refers to Augustine, *City of God* 20.19; to Jerome, *Letter* 152, to Anselm, and to Aquinas, and comments on the readers’ not being shaken in mind (605; v. 2), and on the delay of the advent. 2 Pet. 3:4 asks, “Where is the promise of his coming?” The readers have been deceived; they should have observed Paul’s exhortation to “test all things” (1 Thess. 5:21). Estius suggests that the “man of sin” is “*diabolum incarnatum, id est simul angelum et hominem*” (608). But to compare Christ as the God-Man is blasphemy. The Antichrist signifies the Roman emperors who persecuted the church. Nevertheless, the “*defection*” is “*from the Catholic faith*” (608, my emphasis). This means departure from the jurisdiction of the pontiff of Rome. He refers to Luther and to Erasmus. The Antichrist in the temple had nothing to do with Rome or the church. The passage concerned the Temple of Solomon or of Judaism.

**Obbe Philips** (c. 1560) declared, “The whole papacy is a Sodom, a Babylon, an Egypt ... the work of Antichrist ... according to prophecies of both Daniel (9:27) and Paul (2 Thess. 2:3) by the testimony of the Holy Spirit” (Philips, *A Confession*, 121, in Williams (ed.), *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 207). Before the Reformation, several identified the Antichrist with the pope. Many of the “left-wing” radical reformers followed Luther.

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) gives 2 Thess. 2:3–8 a distinctive turn, from which Luther and Calvin would not have dissented. He applies the apocalyptic passage in Paul to ecclesiology. The “man of sin ... should arise out of the ruins of the Roman Empire, and should occupy its vacant dignity ... the Roman Pontiff. The name ‘Antichrist’ belongs to him pre-eminently ... He professes himself the vice-regent of Christ” (*Disputation* 22.11, *Works*, 1.330). He then applies this to the claim of the reformed churches that they had *not* seceded from the *true apostolic church*. Whereas the Church of Rome claims that secession began with Wycliffe, Huss, Luther, and Bucer, it is the Roman pontiff, *they* claim, who first seceded from the apostles. He will be revealed as “the man of sin, the son of perdition.” Arminius concludes, “This is the hinge of the entire controversy,” namely *who has really initiated “secession from the Church of Christ”* (*Dissertation* 22.11–12, *Works*, 1.336; my emphasis).

**John Donne** (1572–1631), poet and dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, was rooted in patristic writings, especially on the last judgment. He writes:

At the round earth’s imagin’d corners, blow  
Your trumpets, Angels, and arise, arise  
From death you numberlesse infinities  
Of soules, and to your scattred bodies goe,  
All whom the flood did, and fire shall o’erthrow,  
All whom warre, dearth, age, agues, tyannies,  
Despaire, law, chance, hath slaine, and you whose eyes,  
Shall behold God, and never taste deaths woe. . . .  
Tis late to aske for abundance of thy grace,  
When wee are there; here on this lowly ground,  
Teach mee how to repent; for that’s as good  
As if thou hadst seal’d my pardon, with thy blood.

(Holy Sonnets 7, *Complete Poetry*, 238)

**Anglo-Irish** apocalyptic flourished especially from 1579 to 1641 and into the eighteenth century. Both Catholic and Protestant sides in Ireland numbered many martyrs, and felt themselves oppressed: Protestants as a minority population, and under threat from Europe; Catholics under threat from English oppression in Ireland. In 1584, over 200 Catholics were tortured with burning oil; Elizabeth I was excommunicated in 1570, and Spain attacked England in 1588. Many saw the destruction of the Spanish fleet as God’s intervention in history. Melancthon (d. 1560) had formulated a philosophy of history in which God sealed his “pure” church against the Antichrist. In 1579 James Fitzgerald raised the papal flag to attack English forces. War in Ireland became an apocalyptic issue of struggle against the Antichrist, often seen as the papacy. Edmund Spenser was one of many who saw “the purple harlot” as the Catholic Antichrist (see Brady, “Spenser’s Irish Crisis in the 1590s”).

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) (1685) argues that “shaken” (Greek, *saleuthēnai*) “alludes to the waves of the sea that are tossed with the winds, as false doctrines tend to unsettle the mind” (*Commentary*, 3.758). The phrase “be troubled” alludes to soldiers fearful of some sudden alarm. “Spirit” recalls “seducing spirits” in 1 Tim. 4:1, or even of pagan oracles, which claimed to mediate divine revelation. Before Christ may come again, however, there will first come “a falling away.” This “apostasy” does not mean Caius Caesar, as Grotius suggests, or falling away from the Church of Rome “as some papists affirm” (759). It refers to one who promotes sin and falls away from sound apostolic doctrine. It is not only the work of one individual, but an Antichrist (1 John 2:18; 4:3), “a company, order, and succession

of men” who are inspired by a single entity to impose “fines, imprisonments, banishments, tortures” on the faithful (*Commentary*, 3.759). The temple is not that of Solomon or of the Jews, “as the popish doctors speak,” but is the spiritual temple, the church.

## Eighteenth Century Pietism

**Philipp J. Spener** (1635–1705), like many Pietists, expressed his thoughts in hymns. In “When now at last the hour is come,” he alludes to the day of the Lord, although from an individualist perspective:

When now at last the hour is come  
It lacketh now a few short hours  
And I am in eternity;  
The wreath of fadeless heaven flowers  
Is twined already there for me.  
Until the fight is wholly fought,  
And all my soul is thither caught,  
Where shining palms the conquerors bear.

But when that morning shall appear,  
When our great judge, the Son of God,  
Shall give to those who loved Him here  
Their gracious undeserved reward.  
Then in the glorious halls above,  
I, too, among the hosts shall stand,  
And take from His all-faithful hand  
The crown of righteousness and love.

**Sir Isaac Newton** (1642–1727) is best known as a physicist, and for his “laws of motion,” but he had a strong interest in biblical interpretation and eschatology. In 1704 he writes that the world will not end before 2060, not to estimate the time of the end, but to prevent the “rash conjectures of fanciful men” about its timing. He identified the Antichrist as the papacy (Newton, *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and on the Apocalypse of St. John*).

**Johann Albrecht Bengel** (1687–1752) writes similarly in 1741. He declares, “That gathering will be the crowning one” (*Gnomon*, 806; *New Testament Word Studies*, 2.492). Nevertheless some are “too eager to know the future . . . The day of Christ is not so near.” “Some great evil” must first come. With regard to the man of sin and Antichrist in Revelation, the notion of Luther and Calvin that this refers to the pope still finds some place in Bengel. In the original Latin of his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* he says, “The Pope is, as it were, the man of sin (*Papa est quodomo homo peccati*)” (810).

## The Nineteenth Century

**William Blake** (1757–1827) applied apocalyptic imagery to the present not least in his 1804 poem *Jerusalem*. It concludes:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant land.

(Davie [ed.], *New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, 208)

**Friedrich Schleiermacher** (1768–1834) argued that after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, “The question was not even raised among Christians whether all those [apocalyptic] sayings might not be referred to Christ’s future, understood in a non-literal way. Everything Chiliastic had been purged out ... (These passages) are not to be taken literally ... Still less have we Biblical warrant for believing that there is a prior universal separation of the good from the bad” (*The Christian Faith*, 707–8).

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) prefers to call vv. 1–12 both “the chief point of his Epistle” and “a properly *prophetic* communication” (*Commentary*, 416; emphasis original). He considers this passage in detail (446–60). Some of this grows into a legacy inherited by the book of Revelation. Divergent applications show that some of the imagery is mainly figurative. There is a strong concordance with Jewish notions of the end. It is important to see, however, that Paul is not giving “subjective speculations” of his own, but “objective certainties” (447). He treats the “gathering together” seriously as our coming to meet him [Christ].” Paul wants his readers to await the Parousia without anxiety, and with a “calm and cheerful faith,” rather than with anxious fear (448–9). Since no one except God knows the timing of the Parousia, Paul rebukes some of the readers not simply for miscalculating the timing, but for claiming “*certainty*” (emphasis original) about its imminence (450). He is uncertain about what Paul means by “apostasy” (453). Yet he suggests that the readers of the epistle know what it meant. The Antichrist is both an *effect* of the falling away and a *cause* of the falling away (454). The man of sin is guilty of “self-deification,” the selfishness of wanting to be “all in all.” The Roman emperors could be guilty of this. False deceivers are referred to in 1 John 2:4. The man of lawlessness “exalts himself” (see Rev. 13:18). The temple is the Temple in Jerusalem, and the man of sin seeks to take the place of Christ (457, 460).

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93) continued the *figurative* interpretation of the apocalyptic passage, but also considered it an important Pauline theme, authentic to Paul. In his commentary he included an extended essay on “the man of sin” (Jowett,

*Thessalonians*, 178–94). He reviewed speculative applications to Nero, Caligula, Titus, Vitellius, the pope, Muhammad, and even the French Revolution and the German Empire, only to conclude, “Most of these questions may be set aside” (179). The man of sin verses, he asserts, are not a “detached prophecy,” but “formed a leading subject of the Apostle’s teaching” (180). Paul saw a vision of evil which was “around and very near him” (181). “Figurative language” is shared by Ezekiel, Daniel, Matthew, Peter, Jude, and Revelation (182–3). But like Daniel and Revelation, but unlike Ezekiel, this evil is universal, not tied to a particularly historical situation. Already there are many antichrists: there is a habitual theme of “falling away.” These are seen not as abstractions, but as living creatures, as in Revelation. Even the Roman Empire and Jewish law may have a role in sustaining them (192). Idealized and refined, they may include “evil in our own hearts” (194). The revelation of the man of sin also reflects “the image of self-destroying evil” (*Thessalonians*, 163).

**J. B. Lightfoot** (1828–89) acknowledges that Paul uses imagery formerly applied to Antiochus Epiphanes in Dan. 11:36. Many apply “the Temple” to Pompey’s attempt to set up his image in the Temple of Jerusalem. But Paul refers to the church, not the literal temple, “for ‘the man of sin’ is a personification” (*Notes*, 111–13). “Son of perdition” is a Hebraism, like “son of death” in 1 Sam. 20:31, and means destined to be destroyed. Judas is called the son of destruction in John 17:12. The Hebraism is more forceful than the normal Greek, and suitable to prophetic discourse. Clearly the watershed on apocalyptic began with the nineteenth century, where in general a greater emphasis on its figurative or symbolic imagery emerged.

## “He Who Now Restrains” and “The Lawless One” (2 Thess. 2:6b–12)

### Introduction and Overview

The following section focuses on specific issues raised by the text; we have not duplicated what has been said on vv. 1–5. Many commentators, including Augustine, acknowledge that “what restrains” (Greek neuter, *to katechon*, v. 6) and “he who restrains” (Greek masculine, *ho katechōn*, v. 7) convey meanings once understood by the first addressees, but which are now obscure for the present reader. It may be the case that when there is persecution, a writer of apocalyptic uses some kind of symbolic code, which the immediate readers will have understood, but not state officials of the time. This would apply to any polemic against Rome in Thessalonica, where the granting of political privileges, allied with the near universality of the imperial cult, would make this an extraordinarily sensitive issue.

Added to this, apocalyptists see local conflict as often mirroring cosmic and universal battles between God, as Creator, and his arch-enemy the devil; or here, the “lawless one” (NRSV, v. 8). The boundary may become blurred between mythological sources or “broken myth” and symbol or poetic imagery. William Neil considers that we have here “a blend of history and mythology” (*Thessalonians*, 171), although the function of myth and history differs.

Paul refers to Satan in v. 9. Most commentators speak of the Antichrist, but Paul neither affirms nor denies whether Antichrist actually exists. The practical thrust of language about cosmic occurrences is that everything will take place at a divinely appointed and ordered time. The evil influence of the lawless one or Satan is already at work, presumably especially in the oppression or persecution which the readers face. Something or someone, however, restrains this within limits until at last it will overreach itself, and be exposed as what it is. These symbolic figures are clearly cosmic in nature. Some see them as an embodiment of collective evil; others see them as personal agencies, who have rebelled against God. The developing antagonism towards God will result in widespread apostasy.

The identity of “what restrains” and “he who restrains” remains controversial. Some identify these with God and divine providence; others, for example Ernest Best, reject this (*Thessalonians*, 292). M. Dibelius (*An die Thessalonicher I, II, an die Philipper*, 47–51) speaks of “the binding of Satan,” which occurs as a theme in Tobit 8:3; 1 Enoch 10:4–5, 11–12; Jubilees 48:15; Mark 3:27 (Matt. 12:29; Luke 11:21); and Rev. 20:2. Gibling (*The Threat to Faith*) sees the restrainer as a force hostile to God, yet one which remains under God’s control. Some commentators in history have identified the restrainer with the Holy Spirit, or even with Paul.

Yet it is hazardous to try to interpret symbol so precisely. We have already referred to “broken myth” in B. S. Childs and G. B. Caird to mean imagery that is borrowed from what was once myth, but is now used with critical awareness (Childs, *Myth and Reality*, 42; Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 226). In the history of reception, many identify the Antichrist with a particular group or figure, as we noted above. Irenaeus is probably the first writer explicitly to identify the Antichrist as Jews or Judaism. This would have been intelligible in Paul’s day. The reformers’ identification of the Antichrist with the papacy, and some Catholics’ identification of him with those who have seceded from Rome, remain peculiar to a later generation.

We have already argued in the Introduction that apocalyptic is not un-Pauline. Cosmic struggle, divine intervention, judgment, and new creation remain central to Paul, as Klaus Koch and others argue. The pastoral application concerns the role of persecution, the sovereignty of God, and God’s timing of events. Paul introduces “deception” (v. 10) to show that unbelievers do not recognize the true character of the evil ranged against the faithful. God’s ultimate purpose is to bring about the condemnation of the wicked, and deliverance

of believers. To understand why unbelievers are “deceived,” and why Christians must resist this deception, arises from Paul’s pastoral concern. A secondary pastoral purpose is to prevent premature apocalyptic “enthusiasm” from unbalancing the readers. Malherbe speaks of the need for “A proper eschatological perspective” (*Letters to the Thessalonians*, 422; see Jewett, above).

## The Patristic Era

**Justin** (c. 100–c. 165) has a reference to the predictive prophecy of the Old Testament that Christ will subdue his enemies (*First Apology*, 40). He declares that “the Father will bring Christ to heaven after he has raised him from the dead, and will keep him there until he has subdued his enemies, the devils” (*First Apology* 45; ANF 1.178).

**Irenaeus** (c. 130–c. 200) quotes the whole of 2 Thess. 2:8, 11, beginning, “The wicked one shall be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus shall slay with the spirit [or breath] of his mouth, and destroy by the presence of his coming, whose [the Antichrist’s coming] is after the working of Satan ... in all portents of lies” (*Against Heresies* 5.25.3; ANF 1.554). He expounds the tyranny of the Antichrist, having just considered Daniel 7 and Matthew 24, and identifies “the lawless one” with the beast of Daniel 7, the false teacher of John 5:43, and also the “unjust judge” of Jesus’s parables in Luke 18:2. 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 remains decisive. He returns to the theme of the Antichrist and new creation in *Against Heresies* 5.24.2 (ANF 1.566). He addresses followers of Marcion, whom he associates with the Antichrist in 2 Thess. 2:11 (*Against Heresies* 4.29.2; ANF 1.502). In a fourth reference, he speaks again of the Antichrist: “The wicked shall be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus shall slay with the Spirit of his mouth ... whose coming is after the working of Satan, with all power and signs, and lying wonders” (*Against Heresies* 3.7.2; ANF 1.420).

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) quotes in full 2 Thess. 2:1–7 and 2:8–10, along with Revelation 16, primarily to assert the future resurrection, but also to show that future resurrection does not occur immediately upon death (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 24, 25; ANF 3.563). We considered his many references above.

**Hippolytus** (170–236) produced a treatise *On Christ and the Antichrist*. He quotes the whole of 2 Thess. 2:1–11, including language about “the lawless one” (vv. 3–5), about the restrainer and “mystery of lawlessness” (vv. 6–8), about “Satan with signs and lying wonders” (v. 9), and about “delusion” (v. 11; Hippolytus, *On the Antichrist* 63; ANF 5.218).

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) quotes 2 Thess. 2:6–12, as well as vv. 3–4 (*Against Celsus* 2.49; ANF 4.451). He is discussing the falsehood of Celsus’s claims about the disciples of Jesus, and shows that not only did Jesus perform miracles, but

Paul predicts that “the mystery of iniquity already works” with false signs. Many will believe a lie. “Celsus falsifies the words of Jesus,” as vv. 6–12 warns us. Celsus is indeed “a certain Satan who contrives such devices” (51). Origen also attacked Celsus for viewing the creation account as “silly,” and holding its imagery up to ridicule. Celsus also found fault with language about the Antichrist (*Against Heresies* 6.44). He quotes much of vv.1–12, including Paul’s reference to the man of sin and “the son of perdition, who . . . showed himself that he is God” (v. 7). He will be revealed in his time, and then be destroyed (v. 8). For the mystery of iniquity doth already work (v. 9); and God sends deception upon the wicked (Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.46).

**Cyprian** (d. 258) writes to warn Cornelius not to give credence to the false charges and lies of Felicissimus and Fortunatus against him. Paul warns us of those who do not love the truth. Indeed God sends upon them “strong delusion that they should believe a lie, that they all might be judged” (vv. 10–12; Cyprian, *Epistle* 54.13; ANF 5.343). Cyprian addresses the plight of those who have fallen away, and have denied Christ and his atonement (*Treatise* 3.33). He acknowledges that God may have sent upon them a spirit of deadness, which may make repentance difficult. He quotes v. 10 to indicate that they should believe a lie “that they all might be damned who believe not the truth” (Cyprian, *Treatises* 3.33; ANF 5.446). Like Origen, he applies 2 Thess. 2:6–12 to the present.

**Lactantius** (c. 250–c. 325) refers to 2 Thess. 2: 7, in his discussion of the devastation of the world and the change of great empires (*The Divine Institutes* 7.15; ANF 7.212). It is noteworthy that at least *six* pre-Nicene fathers, including *five* major figures, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, and Cyprian, all used and valued *apocalyptic* (see more fully above).

**Athanasius** (c. 296–373) sees Constantius as Antichrist, both as a patron of Arianism and persecutor, who exercises tyranny over the church. He is “the son of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:8), whom the Lord Jesus will destroy (*History of the Arians* 77; NPNF2 4.299). Like Origen and Cyprian, he applies this apocalyptic passage to the present.

**Ambrose** (c. 338–397) expounds the coaction of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Their unity in pronouncing judgment is seen in the justice of the judgment. When we read, “The Lord Jesus shall slay with the Spirit [or breath] of his mouth” (2 Thess. 2:8), we know that through unity with the Spirit that judgment will be just (*On the Holy Spirit* 3.7.44; NPNF2 10.141).

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) understands “the mystery of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:7) as the persecution of the church by the Roman Empire. It was “initiated by Nero, who, in his zeal for idols and with the instigation of his father, the devil, killed the apostles. [This] continued up to Diocletian and most recently Julian” under the guise of a religion of “a crowd of gods” (*turba deorum*; *Commentarius*, 3.240). Polytheistic religion and the power of Rome oppose

Christianity. Copying the incarnation of Christ, he writes, the embodiment of the mystery of iniquity “will be thought of as a god” (241). He will use false signs and lying, deceptive wonders, as also the Revelation of John declares (241–2). However, the devil will know that his destruction will soon come about. He will be “cast down from the heavens.” Idolatry is the major “Antichrist.”

**Cyril of Jerusalem** (315–87) writes on several verses from 2 Thess. 2:3–12. The “man of sin” becomes seated in the Temple of the Jews. Cyril explains, “For he desires to be worshipped by the Jews” (*Catechetical Lectures* 15.15). He will seek to rebuild its ruins, perform lying wonders, and exalt himself. With 2 Thess. 2:4–10 he compares Dan. 7:21 and Matt. 24:16, 21. A key theme is deception, of which “the Apostle warns us.” But Christ will come, descending from heaven (1 Thess. 2:16), and all will be judged. Christ will bring his angels with him (*Lecture* 15.24). Cyril refers to a number of apocalyptic passages in his exposition of the Parousia and last judgment (15.1–33; NPNF2 7.104–14).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) writes that if he had meant that the restrainer was the Holy Spirit and his gifts, Paul “would not have spoken obscurely” (*Homily* 4 on 2 Thessalonians; NPNF1 13.388). Some say that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit; others say that this is the Roman Empire. The latter also explains why Paul wrote in obscure terms of the empire. The “mystery of lawlessness” concerns “Nero, as if he were the type of Antichrist. For he, too, wished to be thought a god” (389). As long as fear of the empire exists, no one will willingly exalt himself. But, using the language of Daniel about empires, Paul declares that in due course the Lord Jesus Christ will slay all opposition by the breath of his mouth, and will put an end to all deceit and lying wonders. All kingdoms will undergo his judgment, including the Babylonians, the Persians, the Macedonians, and the Romans (389–90). The one God is sovereign, and Christians must not fear, even though evil is “terrible in every way” (*Hom.* 4; 390).

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) admits that what “restrains” the mystery of iniquity is unclear. It might come from the Holy Spirit, although miraculous gifts of the Spirit will decline. But he rejects this view. It is better seen as the providential purposes of God. God alone can restrain the devil. God determines the right time and its boundaries (Greek fragment: *to kairon horisai tēi sunteleiāi tou aiōnos*; *Commentarius*, 2.54).

**Augustine** (354–430) sees the man of sin seated in the temple of God as an Antichrist within the church (*City of God* 20.19). Paul was unwilling to make an explicit statement about “what restrains,” because his readers knew its meaning already. Augustine declared, “I frankly confess that I do not know what he means” (20.19). But he offers others’ “conjectures”: the Roman Empire, Nero, or hypocrites within the church, on the basis of 1 John 2:18–19. Others conjecture that the “Antichrist” represents those who adhere to unbelief and to Satan. The main point of the passage is that Christ will judge the wicked, with their

quest for power, and their performance of lying wonders. Satan will fall from heaven. God will judge all, and put everything to rights. *City of God* 20.19 (NPNF1 2.437–8) remains devoted to interpreting 2 Thess. 2:1–11. This is not treated as a map of the future, but as a passage designed to assist truth and faith. (See, however, above, on vv. 1–5.)

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) doubts whether “that which restrains” means the Roman Empire, or the grace of the Spirit. Rome seems to be the fourth beast in Daniel. It is God who determines what will occur when. Thus “that which restrains” is “God’s decree.” Meanwhile the church must preach the gospel to every nation, and to overthrow idolatry and superstition. “The mystery of iniquity” is not Nero, but “the heresies that had sprung up,” leading many “from the truth” (*Letters*, 129). In due time, deceit will be publicly exposed as what it is, and “with the breath of his lips, he [Christ] will destroy the godless.” Satan inspired the mystery of iniquity; but the lovers of wickedness will be shown up” (2 Thess. 2:10–12; 130). God’s hidden judgment on the wicked now will then be revealed publicly.

## The Medieval Period

**Bede the Venerable** (c. 673–735) repeats Augustine’s comments almost verbatim. He stresses that the readers knew “what is now restraining him,” hence Paul does not identify it explicitly (*Excerpts from the Works of St. Augustine*, 291). Satan works “the mystery of lawlessness.” God sends a delusion that the wicked may believe a lie, because they do not love the truth. The excerpt follows *The City of God* 20.13 (*Excerpts*, 291–3).

**Haimo of Auxere** (c. 810–c. 875) adds that “what restrains” is “the reign of the Romans . . . The mystery of iniquity is . . . the murder of the holy martyrs and the persecution of Christ’s faithful carried out by Nero and his princes” (*Second Thessalonians*, 26–7). It is called “mystery” because the devil works through the Antichrist, when he kills the holy martyrs, who down the centuries included Elijah and Enoch. In his zeal for idols, Nero begins the killing, which continues up to Diocletian and Julian. The Antichrist is prefigured in earlier persecutors, just as Christ is prefigured in the death of Abel (27). But “power will have been stripped away from the Roman Empire,” when Christ or Michael will kill the Antichrist, as asserted by Gregory. Christ will slay the Antichrist at the place of his ascension, Mount Olivet (taken from Jerome, CCSL 75A.33–4). This will take place at the day of judgment (*Second Thessalonians*, 28–9). “Signs and prodigies” are foreign to the truth. The Antichrist will hand people over to false worship, to worship “the father of lies.” Those who are deluded include the Jews (29).

**Thietland of Einsiedeln** (c. 900–965) sees parallels between the readers of 2 Thessalonians and those of the early Middle Ages who preached the imminence of the end. He also saw some in the church as antichrists. He draws extensively on Augustine’s *City of God*, and on Ambrosiaster and Haimo. He quotes Augustine on the reason for the obscurity of “what now restrains,” or “detains” the mystery of evil. He describes the standard views of “the mystery of iniquity,” but confesses that he does not know what this term means (*Second Thessalonians*, 53). On v. 7b, however, he asserts that “what restrains” is the judgment of the Roman Empire (53–4). Falsehoods also occur in the church (54; 1 John 2:18). Yet the wicked will be exposed, as Rev. 20:1 indicates. Christ is the “angel ... who also has the key to the abyss” (*Second Thessalonians*, 55). Thietland considers Rev. 20:1–7, with its millennial concern. Gog and Magog receive a symbolic interpretation (57). The coming of Christ “will be in a flash of lightening” (see Matt. 24:27), and Christ will slay all opposition (58). He writes, “The Apostle did not hesitate to say to them that God was the working of error” (59). This is similar to Paul’s thought in Rom. 1:28 that God “gave them up.” Yet “even those who were deceived and led astray shall be justified at the last and open judgment of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ” (59).

Hughes comments, “A crossing of Revelation and 2 Thessalonians [is] unprecedented in the tradition of 2 Thessalonians commentaries” (*Constructing the Antichrist*, 174). Stephen Cartwright and Kevin Hughes suggest that Thietland fixes the time of the end and the millennium at 1000 or 1,033 (Hughes and Cartwright (eds.), *Second Thessalonians*, 175–6; Hughes, *Constructing the Antichrist*, 35). In Thietland, “eschatology is neither wholly de-historicized nor dangerously precise” (Hughes, *Constructing the Antichrist*, 177). This preserved the power of apocalyptic to shape holiness of life in the present.

**Lanfranc** (c. 1010–89) writes his commentary on 2 Thessalonians with inter-linear glosses alongside excerpts from the church fathers. But he argues that “what restrains” is the love of Christians and their mission to every creature. In the last days “love will grow cold”; becoming unlike “the time of the apostles and martyrs” (PL 150.342C–344A). Lanfranc would like to know the time of the end. Yet he knows that Paul insists that certain signs will come first.

The *Glossa Ordinaria* (12th century) argued that Christ’s coming “in flames of fire” (2 Thess. 2:8) was a symbolic description of Christ’s consuming his enemies, and of the purification of the faithful. Judgment awaits unbelievers and heretics. The comments largely follow Ambrosiaster, Augustine, and Lanfranc.

**Peter Lombard** (c. 1100–61) draws on the *Glossa Ordinaria*, but also paid attention to Paul’s aims, purpose, and methods of argument (*Collectanea in epistulas omnes Pauli*, PL 191.1302B). In 2 Thess. 2:1–12 the purpose and aim is to save his readers from being deceived. “What restrains” is the fulfillment of

the great commission in Matt. 28:19–20. He agrees with Augustine about the need to avoid presumptuous questions about dates and events. Peter Lombard “allows Augustine to speak for him to discourage such apocalyptic realism” (Hughes, *Constructing the Antichrist*, 234). Evil may lie hidden in the church, but it will be exposed (Peter Lombard, in PL 192.319B–C).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) observes, “The coming of Antichrist will be “according to the working of Satan,” as it is written (2 Thess. 2:9)” (*Summa Theologia* 1, qu. 113, art. 4, ad. 3). Demons cannot lead men astray by means of “real” miracles, for demonic work is by the agency of Satan, who does “lying wonders,” as in 2 Thess. 2:9 (*Summa Theologiae* 1, qu. 114, art. 4, ad. 1). In part 2.2, qu. 178, art. 1, ad. 2, Aquinas compares the false prophets of Matt. 24:24, and argues that even an “unclean spirit” can work “false” miracles on the analogy of 1 Cor. 12:4. The devil and the Antichrist are not two separate entities, but are one “by the effect of wickedness” (*Summa Theologiae* 3, qu. 8, art. 8, ad. 6–8). The whole of article 8 is on the Antichrist.

**Dante** (c. 1265–1321) writes:

This way for the sorrowful city,  
This way for eternal suffering;  
This way to join the lost people,  
Abandon all hope, you who enter.  
(See further, above.)

**John Wycliffe** (c. 1333–84) insists that iniquity can flourish in the visible church, with no infallible method for distinguishing between “wheat” and “tares” within it. His *De potestate papae* (1379) made a bitter attack on the papacy, arguing that a pope who fails to follow Christ is the Antichrist. A pope may be a heretic. In *The Pastoral Office* he similarly attacks some clergy. He does not appear to write on 2 Thess. 2:1–12, but he writes on the Antichrist. He is polemical, but not explicitly apocalyptic. He strongly emphasizes the authority of the Bible. His followers, dubbed the Lollards, however, showed a much more apocalyptic cast of mind, defending poor, persecuted communities against the wealthier Roman *curia* and clerical establishment. They looked to the last judgment to vindicate the faithful, and influenced movements at Prague and Bohemia, as well as followers of John Huss.

**John Huss** (1371–1415) was executed for his opposition to the papacy, but the “Taborite” movement developed a millenarian and apocalyptic theology of the Antichrist, who was identified with the pope. Rev. 19:20–1 and 2 Thess. 2:8 played a part in this. As a result of Hussite wars, a “reformed” church was first founded in Bohemia. At his death Huss prophesied that an unstoppable reformer would arise within 100 years.

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) restored the emphasis on universality in apocalyptic, seeing world history as “an all-encompassing struggle between God and the devil” (Barnes, “Images of Hope and Despair,” 152). Some, as we noted, already identified the Antichrist with the papacy. In 2 Thess. 2:7 “the one who now restrains” is the secular state ruled by “godly princes.” Luther writes, “The Antichrist shall, through Satan, be mighty in false, miraculous, signs” (2 Thess. 2:9; Luther, “An Appeal to the Ruling Class” [1520], 417). In his “Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” (1520) Luther appeals to his readers to remove “the knaves at Rome” from German soil (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 2, pt. 1). The papacy, Luther declares, claims false titles and is characterized by lies and hypocrisy; “this we read in Thessalonians” (2 Thess. 2:10; Luther, *Works*, vol. 28: *Commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7 and 15*, and *Lectures on 1 Timothy*, 310).

Luther’s apocalyptic vision grew out of a sense of a corrupted Church of Rome and the nightmare of an invasion of Europe by the Turks, although he rejected many literalistic speculations of the late Middle Ages. He discouraged chronological predictions of the end, although his friend Michael Stifel predicted that the end would come at 8 a.m. on October 19, 1533. Andreas Osiander also wrote conjectures on the last days and the end of the world in 1544. The “radical” or “left-wing” reformers were a thorn in Luther’s side. Melchior Hofmann turned from Lutheranism to become an Anabaptist. In 1530 he wrote of “the strong delusion” that must precede the Parousia, a delusion which will even affect “those who have understood the Word and the Spirit” (2 Thess. 2:11; Williams (ed.), *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 200). In 1531 Sebastian Franck wrote to John Campanus, an Anabaptist who was influenced by Hofmann, that God would not wish to restore outworn sacraments, commandeered by Rome the Antichrist, but the Lord’s advent will destroy him (2 Thess. 2:8; *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 154).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) considers Chrysostom’s arguments that “what now restrains” (2 Thess. 2:6) could refer either to the Holy Spirit or to the Roman Empire. But he prefers the suggestion that the preaching of the gospel to every nation in Matthew 28:19–20, fits scripture as a whole best (*Commentary*, 90–1). Satan “will be revealed” in contrast to the “secret and clandestine war” which he now wages (2:7–8). He refers to 1 John 2:18–23. Finally, “The Antichrist will be reduced to nothing by the word of the Lord” (92). Christ will appear from heaven as Judge, although he will also overcome the devil beforehand. He “chases away the darkness of night” (92). Calvin writes, “The dawn of the day makes the thick darkness of his reign disappear” (93). Antichrist’s miracles are

false, like those of the Egyptian magicians (Exod. 7:11). Antichrist's power, Calvin writes, "is controlled by what it allows him to do" (*Commentary*, 94). Paul wanted his readers to remain alert, but also hopeful, because Satan's power is curbed. The wicked complain that they perish for no reason, but Paul shows that they had not received the truths they have been shown. They "refused to love the truth" (94–5; 2 Thess. 2:10). God allows them to be deluded, just as "God gave them up" in Rom. 1:28. Calvin declares, "How dreadfully superstitious and deluded the Papacy is!" (95; 2:11). People receive the punishment that their godlessness deserves (v. 12; 95). Similar themes occur in the *Institutes* (1, preface, 9). Satan sends on those who receive not the truth "just punishment" and "strong delusion" (v. 11; *Institutes* 1, preface, 10). The fanatics substitute false revelations of the Spirit for the written word of God (1..9.1–3; 2.4.5; tr. Beveridge, 269).

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) writes of "giving sinners over to reprobate mind," citing Rom. 1:28 and 2 Thess. 2:9–11 (*Oration*, 5.21, *Works*, 1). In his *Disputation* 10 on providence and evil he notes God's allowing deception in vv. 6–12 (271). It is not contradictory that "God grants permission to the power and will of a creature to commit an act," as vv. 7–10 suggest (10.9; 276). God even permits a "lie" (v. 11; *Works*, 1.80); while "they who do not obey the truth, but believe a lie, are to be judged, to eternal destruction (v. 12; *Works*, 1.303). Arminius urges, "The approaching advent of Antichrist is predicted to be "with all power and signs, and lying wonders" (v. 9; *Oration* 5.6.2; *Works*, 88). But "an appointment unto wrath" is duly ordained for the Antichrist. "God condemns to eternal death unbelievers, who by their fault ... would not believe" (2 Thess. 2:10–11; Rom. 9:22; *Works*, 11.303). Arminius is throughout concerned with the problem of divine sovereignty and human freedom. He continues, "They believe a lie, and are to be judged to eternal destruction" (v. 12; *Works*, 303). Bullinger, Bucer, and Arminius see the restrainer as the Roman Empire. Bullinger and Bucer see Muslims as the Antichrist also.

**Estius** (1542–1613) sees the practical thrust as a matter of God's timing (*in suo tempore*; *Commentarius*, 2.611). The restrainer, in his view, "is the grace of the Holy Spirit," or "true religion." The Antichrist was primarily the Roman Empire for Paul. He insists, predictably, however, that for his own day the Antichrist is not the papacy, for then the term would apply to the blessed apostle Peter. It is *the seceding church* (611–12). He considers whether "the mystery of iniquity" might relate to Nero. He gives a realistic and historical rendering of apocalyptic, while recognizing that symbolic images can have more than one distinct application (614–18). On "*how* the king is said to come" invites some degree of openness; "*that* he will come is certain" (615; my emphasis). But certain signs will come first. He sees no necessary incon-

sistency in this idea. “Lying wonders” constitute one such sign (616–17). Grotius offers a similar interpretation, except that he sees the Antichrist as Gaius Caligula.

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) argues that Paul has to speak by obscure allusion in v. 7 because he thought it “not safe openly to declare in writing” (*Commentary*, 3.761). Moreover the Greek *to katechōn* (that which restrains) “was both a thing and a person.” It refers in general to the Roman Empire and in particular to an emperor. Some, he says, speculate that it may signify the move from Rome to Constantinople, which then gave greater power to “the Bishop of Rome.” If it connotes the break-up of the Roman Empire, this accords with Daniel and with Rev. 13:1. He cites Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine’s *City of God*, and Jerome. “The mystery of iniquity” is wickedness under the guise of godliness, which well fits the Jesuits, and their false doctrines (v. 7). The “revealing” in v. 8 stands in contrast with the disguise. When the mystery is unmasked, the Antichrist will be ruined. The Lord will consume him, like Jezebel (Rev. 2:20, 22; 17:14). This is “the stone cut out of the mountain without hands” in Dan. 2:34. Today this is often seen as a key theme of apocalyptic (762). Poole compares Matthew 13 and 25, and the false prophet of Rev. 19:20. “Lying wonders” reveals Satan as “God’s ape” (763). But judgment will expose the lie (v. 12).

**Thomas Vincent** (1634–78) wrote *Fire and Brimstone in Hell, to Burn the Wicked* (1670) citing 2 Thess. 1:7–9, but not 2 Thess. 2:1–12 (discussed and quoted above).

**John Milton** (1608–74) borrowed from classical sources in *Paradise Lost* to depict imaginative pictures of hell, including the classical rivers Styx and Lethe, which fed a burning lake of sulfur and “visible darkness.” Hydras and Gorgons guarded the gates, where Satan meets his doom. In his concept of “inner hell” Satan cries, “Myself am Hell” (*Paradise Lost* 4.75). In 1632 he wrote:

Hence, loathed Melancholy,  
Of Cerberus, and blackest Midnight born,  
In Stygian cave forlorn,  
‘Mongst horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights unholy.  
(*L’Allegro* 1.1)

Milton paints the pride of Antichrist:

To sit in darkness here  
Hatching vain empires.  
(*Paradise Lost* 1.377)

Of deceit and delusion he writes:

“Demonic frenzy, moping melancholy,  
And moon-struck madness.

(*Paradise Lost* 11.1.485)

## The Eighteenth Century

**Jonathan Edwards** (1703–58) included among his *Works* of 1735 and 1753 *The Portion of the Wicked*, *Wrath upon the Wicked*, and *Natural Man in a Dreadful Condition*, drawing largely on Rom. 2:8–9; Dan. 12:2; 1 Thess. 2:16; and Rev. 14:10, 19 and 20:15.

**Johann Albrecht Bengel** (1687–1752) shows more careful moderation. “That which restrains” is both neuter and masculine (Latin, *id quod retinat ... qui retinat*); and signifies “a powerful whole ... divided into many parts” (*Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, 812; *New Testament Word Studies*, 2.498–9). Paul draws on Isa. 11:4 (LXX) for “slay with the Spirit of his mouth.” The false prophet may be parallel to Rev. 13:13, the false prophet who serves the beast.

**Johann Jakob Wettstein** (1693–1754) follows Grotius in identifying the Antichrist with Gaius Caligula; and Vitellius, Vespasian, or probably Titus as “the mystery of lawlessness,” who is restrained by Nero, until whose death they cannot reign and destroy Jerusalem. **Jean A. Turretin** (1739) is one of a minority who perpetuates the Reformation view of the papacy as the Antichrist.

## The Nineteenth Century

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) (1840) acknowledges that “the Restrainer” (v. 6) is “extremely obscure” (*Commentary*, 459). But the emphasis falls on “the appointed time.” He compares Paul’s words, “When the time was fulfilled, God sent his Son” (Gal. 4:4). Hence whatever “what restrains” is “not *against* God’s will” (459; emphasis original). In v. 7, the satanic power “urges forward the Antichrist as its fruit” (460). The “mystery of iniquity” is the apocalyptic imagery used in Revelation. Evil works in secret until it becomes exposed (461). But “Antichrist is, like the devil, a mere abstraction ... There are many Antichrists: men, in whom the evil principle operates” (464). A careful comparison of writers in the history of interpretation shows that we must distinguish between prophecies already fulfilled and those which still await fulfillment.

There is nothing in Paul's language which suggests a concrete identification of the Antichrist with Nero (465). Nor does Paul refer to the great empires of Daniel (466–70). The history of the world presents "*personalities ... tendencies*" (emphasis original), but these are no more than *analogies* with Paul's images. Again, the reappearing of the Antichrist on earth is no more than a "parallel" with Christ's advent (473).

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93) suggests that "that which restrains" may be "the prayers of Christians, or the ministry of the Apostle himself, or the Roman Empire" (*Thessalonians*, 165). It may also mean "more generally, the purpose of God." Jowett offers a special essay on the man of sin (178–94), which includes a survey of interpretations. He insists that it is not a "detached prophecy," but "formed a *leading subject of the Apostle's teaching*" (180; my emphasis). He rejects a specific identification of the man of sin with Caligula, Vitellius, Vespasian, or Titus. Paul's vision was very near him. It uses "figurative language" (182), as in Ezekiel, Daniel, Jude, and Revelation. In terms that are "idealized or refined" it may be adapted to every generation (194). The "mystery of lawlessness" expresses both the hidden and "spiritual" character of wickedness (166). The "mystery" of evil already works, but only in a disguised way. Paul draws his language about the destruction of evil from Isa. 11:4, as Bengel had argued. He warns his readers again about lies and deception. Christians are lovers of the truth. In vv. 11–12 Jowett accepts the place of predestination in the Bible. God hardens pharaoh's heart; "He designedly deceives those who deceive themselves" (168).

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) attempts to combine a symbolic and a historical meaning. Verse 7, "that which restrains" (neuter) is changed to "one who restrains" (masculine) in v. 8. The first alludes "in the abstract" to "a system"; the second to a specific person (*Lectures Chiefly Expository*, 295). Subsequent language is "a figurative way of announcing the ease with which the righteous wrath of the divine Son of Man consumes the adversary" (287). Hutchison attacks Newman for being too specific in his essay on the Antichrist. We have to do with "the subtleties of allegory and poetry" (301). This is not simply the product of Paul's Jewish training, nor a morbid product of a desponding mood, nor the "grotesque manifestation of the Judaistic spirit; but a reflection of the cosmic struggle reflected in Westcott's 'The Two Empires: the Church and the World'" (302). This is why the successive application of the principle to Roman power, to Muhammad, and to the papacy, is not entirely far-fetched, as an entirely secondary and indirect meaning.

**W. Bornemann** (d. 1858), like Alford and Lünemann, produces a history of the interpretation of 2 Thess. 2:1–12 (*Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, 400–59). It is probably the longest and most detailed of all. He considers Irenaeus, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, and the reformers as

largely “dogmatic” interpretations. The mainline reformers are “polemical Protestant” readings, who allude to the papacy as Antichrist (414–16). A more historical approach includes Grotius, Wetstein, and Clericus, although they are partly “dogmatic” (418–24). Bornemann’s aim is to reconstruct Paul’s purpose, looking at the apocalyptic background. Schmidt, Bornemann points out, regarded much apocalyptic as dreams, and Baur sees it all of a piece with Jewish eschatology. Bernhard Weiss (1827–1918) opposed Baur, holding that 2 Thessalonians is Pauline. The apocalyptic passage is situated in the circumstances of the letter. The restrainer is the Roman state. Bornemann offers also a detailed exegesis of 2 Thess. 2:6–12 (365–75). The man of lawlessness is “naturally the Antichrist, who is comparable with the man of sin” (370). Numerous parallels occur with Rev. 1:16; 2:12; 19:15, 19–21. Bornemann acknowledges obscure and figurative language, but maintains links with Paul’s thought elsewhere.

**W. B. Yeats** (1865–1939), Anglo-Irish Protestant poet, produces one of the best-known poems of the future advent and loss of a “restraint.” He writes:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.  
The best lack all conviction, while the words  
Are full of passionate intensity.

*(The Second Coming)*

# 2 Thessalonians

2:13–17

## **Thanksgiving, Exhortation and Benediction**

### **Introduction and Overview**

Paul writes a practical and pastorally encouraging passage to readers who are in danger of becoming despondent. They should not be diffident about themselves, for they are “beloved by the Lord” (v. 13). God chose them as the “first-fruits” (the most likely MS reading) of humankind, as Deut. 26:17–18 ascribed to Israel, but which applies now to Christians. The Holy Spirit sanctifies them. This accords with God’s eternal purpose (v. 14), which reaches its climax in

participating in Christ's glory. This eternal purpose of God reflects what God promises in Christ, and belongs to pre-Pauline apostolic tradition (see Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*; Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian*; Eriksson, *Traditions as Rhetorical Proof*).

Some see this passage in *rhetorical* terms as “deliberative” (Witherington, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 230). Others see this thanksgiving in *epistolary* terms as an enhanced epistolary form (Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 435). Both sets of writers agree that this is a pastorally appropriate, practical passage, well suited to Paul's readers. The readers have every reason to “stand firm, and hold fast to the traditions that were taught by us” (v. 15). Paul concludes this section with a benediction, and a prayer that Christ may comfort the readers' hearts. The theme of suffering and triumphant vindication connects the passage with the previous one.

## The Subapostolic and Patristic Eras

**Clement of Rome** (fl. 96) observes, “How blessed are the gifts of God ... righteousness ... assurance and good works” (1 Clement 35:1). **Tatian** (2nd century) comments that thanks are explicitly *due* to God (Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, 20). We ought always to give thanks, he declares, whether it is for recovery from illness, or for liberation from false beliefs. The *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 130) speaks of salvation (v. 13): “O sweet exchange ... O benefits surpassing all expectation” (*Epistle* 9). **Ignatius** (c. 35–107) similarly speaks of “Jesus Christ ... the Saviour of all,” perhaps alluding to 2 Tim. 4:10 (*Epistle to the Magnesians* 1). **Justin** (c. 100–c. 165) refers to Christ as the morning star, who gives salvation (*Dialogue with Trypho* 45). (See the almost identical thanks in 1 Thess. 1: 1.)

**Irenaeus** (c. 130–c. 200) bases truth on “apostolic tradition,” which can be traced through Clement of Rome and through Polycarp (*Against Heresies* 3.3.2–4). The truth is to be found only in the Catholic Church, “built upon the foundation of the Apostles” (*Against Heresies* 3.4.1–3 and 5.1–3; ANF 1.415–18). **Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) similarly declares, “Human teachers, speaking of God, are not reliable; man cannot speak worthily of the truth concerning God ... Human speech is ... incapable of uttering God ... The only wisdom is the God-taught wisdom we possess” (Clement, *Stromata* 6.18; ANF 2.519). The words of Jesus teach truth throughout the world (6:18).

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) has a similar emphasis, but with a difference. He asserts that inspired teachers “possess the foundations of their own theology” (*Against Celsus* 2.71), and that traditions embody the logical implications of scripture (*De Principiis*, preface). But as an Alexandrian he also makes room for a “secret” tradition taught by the Holy Spirit, whereas Irenaeus speaks of

a public tradition. For Origen, tradition includes “discernment by the sanctification of the Holy Spirit (*De Principiis* 1.3.4).

**Ambrose** (c. 338–397) quotes virtually the whole of 2 Thess. 2:13 in the context of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (*Of the Holy Spirit* 3:4:27–28; NPNF2 10.139). He declares, “The Apostle teaches that the Holy Spirit sanctifies. For he speaks thus: ‘We are bound to give thanks to God ... because God chose you ...’ So then, the Father sanctifies, the Son also sanctifies, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies; but the sanctification is one.” The passage has clear Trinitarian implications. Ambrose again quotes v. 13 in 3.14.95. We are joined to the Father, he asserts, by none “except the Holy Spirit, who ... establishes our hearts in holiness, ‘in holiness of the Spirit and belief of the truth’ (2 Thess. 2:13).”

**Basil the Great** (c. 330–379) also calls attention to “the traditions.” These have been passed on by word of mouth from Paul or from the other apostles, without necessarily being written down (*On the Spirit* 29.71). He explicitly quotes 2 Thess. 2:15: “Hold fast the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word of mouth or our Letter” (NPNF2 8.45). **Cyril of Jerusalem** (315–387) quotes Paul’s words, “Hold fast the tradition” (2 Thess. 2:15), arguing that they should be guarded and committed to memory, at least in the form of the Creed (*Catechetical Lectures* 5.12; NPNF2 7.32).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) addresses the whole passage. Salvation is “by sanctifying you through the Spirit.” The Spirit is the efficient cause of our salvation. But he adds, “It is nowhere of works, nowhere of righteous deeds, but through belief of the truth” (*Homily* 4 on v. 13; NPNF1 13.390). On v. 14 Chrysostom comments that it is no small matter than Christ looks on our salvation as his glory. Then he turns to the exhortation in v. 15 to *stand fast*, and to “hold the traditions by which you were taught.” Typically, Paul concludes with the benediction of comfort and hope, and urges that the readers will be established in every good deed and word (v. 16). Paul always holds before the readers “the hope of things future” (*Hom.* 4; NPNF1 13.390).

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) similarly stresses “waiting” for what the Spirit will yet do, and looks to the readers’ future glory in Christ. He also reinforces Paul’s exhortation to hold fast the traditions (“*manete in illis quae vobis tradidimus*”; *Commentarii*, 3.59). **Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430), contrary to popular reputation, stresses that the readers’ security consists in God’s foreknowing that they would be steadfast. He also underlines the importance of the traditions (*Expositions*, 446).

**Augustine** (354–430) set much of the agenda for theological debates through the medieval and Reformation periods. His comments on Paul’s words, “We give thanks ... because God has chosen you” (v. 13). This resonates throughout his treatises on election. God changes the wills of people: “He has mercy on whom he will have mercy ...” (see Rom. 9:18; Augustine, “On Predestination to

Eternal Life,” *Enchiridion* 98; NPNF1 3.268). Augustine explains that Paul illustrates the grace of God, “that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him who calls” (see Rom. 9:15; Exod. 3:29). In 2 Thess. 2:13 election to salvation is the basis for Paul’s thanksgiving to God. Augustine continues, “But if by grace, then it is no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace” (see Rom. 11:5–6; *On Patience* 17; NPNF1 3.533). He cites Rom. 8:28–33: “Whom he did predestine, he also called; and whom he called he justified ... and also glorified.” He comments, “No one perishes because all are elected, because they are called ... Their purpose is not their own, but God’s” (*On Rebuke and Grace* [c. 427] 14; NPNF1 5.477). He continues, “They are elected to reign with Christ ... chosen by him.” He writes, “Our sufficiency is of God” (*On the Predestination of the Saints* 5; NPNF1 5.500).

## The Medieval Era

**Gregory the Great** (c. 540–604) wrote in his *Moralia on Job* that the theme of grace remains evident, and passes into medieval thought, although not without debate. **Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) speaks of “calling” (*vocatio*); of awaiting of future glory; of “holding fast the traditions” (*tenete traditiones*; *In Epistolas B. Paul*, PL 112.542).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) largely follows Augustine on election. He declares: “God is the cause of the goodness in all things ... In his benevolence God intends to bestow good on one whom he loves” (*Summa Theologiae* 1, qu. 20, art. 4). He further observes, “God gives certain good things to some, which he does not give to others. Election is likewise involved in the bestowal of grace and glory” (1, qu. 23, art. 4). He acknowledges that in spite of divine election, some believers fall short. He writes, “The mercy of God is abundantly apparent, in that very many of those whom he chooses for salvation fall short of it according to the course and inclination of nature” (1, qu. 23, art. 7). God loves us, whether we are righteous or not. For this Paul thanks God. The themes of Aquinas’s contemporary, Bonaventura, also have relevance to 2 Thess. 2:13. He insisted on the absolute centrality of truth. He wrote, “If truth is not, it is true that truth is not; something, therefore, is true; and if something is true, it is true that there is truth ... Truth prevails above all things.”

**Dame Julian of Norwich** (1343–1413) declares, “Love was his [God’s] meaning. Who showed it thee? Love. What showed He thee? Love. Wherefore showed it He? For love ... Love is our Lord’s meaning” (*Revelations of Divine Love*, 86). **Henry of Langenstein** writes in 1381, “It is by his [Christ’s] grace and merits that the Church ... continually receives feeling, movement, and vital spirit” (“Conciliarism as Reform,” in Spinka (ed.), *Advocates of Reform*, 132). On the other hand, **Erasmus** (c. 1467–1536) later asserted a less Augustinian and perhaps more “Greek” view of free will, defining it (against Luther) as

“man’s moral ability to accept or reject the proffered grace of God” (in Spinka (ed.), *Advocates of Reform*, 291).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) responded to Erasmus mainly in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525). After the death of Henry VII, Erasmus returned to England and wrote *In Praise of Folly* in 1511, a satire on the contradiction of human nature. From 1517 onwards Luther became increasingly troubled by Erasmus’s theology. They opposed each other’s work, and Luther wrote his polemic *The Bondage of the Will*, to which Erasmus replied in 1526. Luther first insisted that in spite of obscurities in Scripture, the Bible proves a clear enough message for action. He declared concerning the election of believers, “God necessitates all things ... God foreknows and wills all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably” (*Bondage of the Will*, 83–4). Otherwise, how can we trust God’s promises? How else could God perform what he has promised? The word of God cannot fail (Rom. 9:6; see WA 18.618–20). Luther asserts: “Free Will without God’s grace is not free at all” (104). In Luther’s view, Erasmus shows “mere carping obstructionism” (108).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) follows Luther closely, especially in *Institutes* 3.21–2, on election and predestination. Calvin asserts that Paul declares, “Who has called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace given us in Christ Jesus before the world began” (*Institutes* 3.22.3; tr. Beveridge, 2.214). He continues, “If he [God] elected us that we might be holy, he did not elect us because he foresaw that we would be holy” (22.3; 215). On 2 Thess. 2:13 Calvin writes that Paul calls his readers “loved by the Lord,” because of “God’s unmerited love toward them” (*Commentary*, 96). He quotes the classic “election” verse, namely Deut. 7:7: “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples ... but ... because the Lord loved you.” We love “because he [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19). From the beginning, states Paul, “God chose you” (v. 13; 97). Sanctification through the Spirit, Calvin continues, is one more token of God’s decree and election. This concerns “the profound secret counsels of God” (97). On v. 14 Paul repeats that God called the readers. It is as if God stretches out his hand to us (98). Even if everyone else becomes confused, they are “to keep their footing ... remain steady and firm” (98). “Teachings passed on” (v. 15) does not mean “precepts of Church government” but the teachings (*paradoxeis*) of the gospel (98–9). Verse 16 “gives us a clear view of Christ’s divinity,” for he is a source of grace in Paul’s benediction (99). The *Institutes* and *Commentary* are at one.

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) is popularly thought to have opposed Calvin's doctrine of election. Nevertheless he insists that an absolute concept of freedom, the liberty of indifference, was confined to the original state of humankind before the Fall. After the Fall, people need "the assistance of Divine Grace" to "will and perform whatever is truly good. When he is made a partaker of this regeneration or renovation ... he [a human] is capable of thinking, willing and doing what is good, but not without the continued aids of Divine Grace" ("The Free Will of Man," 1.5.2; *Works*, 129). He sees grace as "an infusion of all those gifts of the Holy Spirit which appertain to the regeneration and renewal of man – such as faith, hope, and charity" (130). He considers that v. 13 cannot be interpreted to demonstrate that the scriptures are *not* necessary to salvation (*Works*, 1.228). On v. 14, he observes that Jesus Christ is the "external cause" of salvation; while the word of God is the "instrumental cause," which includes law and gospel (*Works*, 1.305). Arminius also commends the endurance and patience of those who have confessed the faith in the face of persecutors, holding fast the faith that they had received (v. 15). He compares "the Papists," who look beyond Scripture to support their "tradition." The scriptures, he protests, define the difference "between opinion and knowledge" (*Works*, 1.49).

**Estius** (1542–1613) finds relief in leaving the "sad and dreadful" section on the Advent (*Commentarii*, 2.618). God has chosen the readers by his grace. He notes the stress on "ought to give thanks" (*gratias agere Deo debemus*, 619), comparing the use of "first-fruits" to Paul's language about Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus in 1 Cor. 16. The Holy Spirit is the author of all sanctification; therefore Paul can urge that the readers stand firm (v. 15). Tradition does not cease with scripture alone, but *includes the successors of the apostles*, and the Christian church (620).

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) follows a broadly Augustinian-Calvinist approach. Paul speaks of his readers' election and preservation, because he has given a warning of future apostasy. That the readers are "beloved by God" is the reason why he thanks God. But Poole distinguishes three types of election: (1) to office; (2) to the visible people of God (like "external" Jews); and (3) to "election to salvation, as in the text" (*Commentary*, 3.764). He called them "into a state of salvation" by the gospel (765). But they are elected to stand fast. This is a military word. To hold the traditions "meant doctrines" (765). Again, as if to reflect the comments of Arminius, Poole claims that unlike "the Papists," these are to be found "in the Scriptures." Finally, on vv. 16–17, he observes that this underlines the deity of Christ, the source of life and consolation (766).

**Thomas Watson** (c. 1620–1686), a Puritan divine, left his greatest work, *A Body of Practical Divinity*, to be published in 1692. He referred at least four times in this work to 2 Thess. 2:13. He brings together the use of the Bible and sanctification, writing, "Sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the truth, are

put together (v. 13)” (*Body of Divinity*, 33). In ch. 6, he includes a section on “Effectual Calling.” God calls people to holiness (160). The call is immutable (Rom. 11:19; 8:30). He writes, “Election is the cause of our vocation ... the first link of the golden chain of salvation ... Calling is an earnest pledge of glory. ‘God has chosen you to salvation, through justification’ (2 Thess. 2:13). We read of God’s predestinating love” (162). Watson calls sanctification a “sign of our election” (2 Thess. 2: 13). “Election is the cause of our salvation; sanctification is our evidence” (177). He comments, “The Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13) ... sanctifies the heart, as lightning purifies the air, and as fire refines metals ... The Spirit at work generates its [his] own likeness everywhere. The Spirit stamps the impression of its own sanctity upon the heart, as the seal points its likeness upon the wax.” “The Spirit of God in a man perfumes him with holiness, and makes his heart a map of heaven” (179).

## The Eighteenth Century

**John Wesley** (1703–91), who is widely perceived as “Arminian,” glosses over “chosen” (v. 13) by paraphrasing, “Taken you out of the world, and placed you in the way to glory” (*Notes*, 2,700). On v. 15 he repeats Bengel’s comment, “Without adding to, or diminishing from, the traditions ... which I delivered to you.” He notes on v. 15b, “He [Paul] preached before he wrote,” and in any case had written this in his former epistle.

**John Newton** (1725–1807) was a moderate Calvinist, influenced by George Whitefield. He collaborated with his friend William Cowper in producing the *Olney Hymns* (1779). In “More than a Calvinist,” Newton writes, “He [God] chooses for his people better than they could choose for themselves ... The principles he (the believer) has received are enlivened by the agency of the Holy Spirit ... He learns to cease from his own understanding.” In Letter 9, “On the Doctrine of Election and Final Perseverance,” he writes, “The Lord claims the honour ... of a complete salvation, that no power shall pluck his people out of his hand, or separate them from his love ... The doctrines of election and perseverance are comfortable, so they cut off all pretence of boasting and self-dependence, when ... they tend to exalt the Saviour” (*Works*, 56).

The *Olney Hymns* include the following verse:

My grace would soon exhausted be.  
But his is boundless as the sea;  
Then let me boast, with holy Paul,  
That I am nothing, Christ is all.

(Newton, *Works*, 567)

On the dying thief, Newton writes:

Sovereign grace has power alone  
To subdue a heart of stone;  
And the moment grace is felt,  
Then the hardest heart will melt.  
(Newton, *Works*, 561)

**William Cowper** (1731–1800) did not enjoy the robust assurance of John Newton. He was devout, saintly, but fell victim to much introspection, depression, and self-doubt. Cowper writes on the patience to hold fast to what is given:

Lord, who has suffer'd all for me,  
My peace and pardon to procure;  
The lighter cross I bear for Thee,  
Help me with patience to endure.  
(Newton, *Works*, 613)

However, even Newton needed comfort in times of trial, which remains the theme of 2 Thess. 2:13–17:

Sometimes a light surprises  
The Christian while he sings;  
It is the Lord who rises  
With healing in his wings;  
When comforts are declining,  
He grants the soul again,  
A season of clear shining,  
To cheer it after rain.  
(Newton, *Works*, 619)

One final quotation from the *Olney Hymns* also underlines Cowper's "Calvinism":

Grace, triumphant in the throne,  
Scorns a rival, reigns alone!  
Come, and low beneath her sway,  
Cast your idol-works away,  
Works of man, when made his plea,  
Never shall accepted be ...  
Newton, *Works*, 627)

**Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) writes in his *Concise Commentary*: "When we hear of the apostasy of many, it is a great comfort and joy that there is a

remnant according to the election of grace, which does and shall persevere ... The preservation of the saints is because God loved them with an everlasting love, from the beginning of the world ... The outward call of God is by the Gospel, and this rendered effectual by the inward working of the Spirit ... Let us stand fast in the doctrines taught by the apostles, and reject all additions” (*Concise Commentary* on 2 Thess. 2:13–15). On v. 16 Henry comments that the love of God is “the spring and fountain” of all the good we have or hope for.

**John Gill** (1697–1771) a Strict Baptist minister and lecturer, sees salvation and faith as gifts from God and Christ. He writes, “The gospel, strictly taken, is a pure declaration of grace ... All duty and good works belong to the law; promise and grace belong to the gospel” (see Rom. 3:20, 24, 28; *Body of Doctrinal Divinity* 4.7). He insists that Christ calls the Church “my love ... She is ‘all fair’” (see Song Sol. 1:6–9; Eph. 5:27; *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.351). Christ takes the utmost delight in his beloved people (1.363).

## The Nineteenth Century

**Friedrich Schleiermacher** (1768–1834) emphasizes divine election in *The Christian Faith* (1821), even if this seems surprising. The theme emerges in his section on the origin of the church, where he links “call,” “election,” and the work of the Holy Spirit, as Paul does in vv. 13–14. He writes, “All are first drawn within the circle of preparatory grace ... The differences between them are not attributable to themselves” (*Christian Faith*, 534; see sects. 116–17). Implicitly, as in v. 15, Schleiermacher connects this with transmitted tradition, for he considers “the propagation of the Church from one generation to another” (537). He concludes that we use the phrase “divine election” to hold “that its final ground lies in the divine good-pleasure” (538). As always, Schleiermacher reflects both his Pietist background and his love of Kant and the Enlightenment. He writes differently from the eighteenth-century Pietists, but retains many of their basic tenets.

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) sees this section as following the “prophetic” discourse of 2:1–12 (*Commentary*, 476–7). Paul thinks that he *ought* to give thanks that God “had chosen them [his readers] ... and had therefore preserved them” from the destruction of the Antichrist (477; see 1:3). God’s election is eternal. “Eternal” means “independent of time.” Salvation is the ultimate aim. “The genuine apostolical *paradoxeis* define the true nature of the Gospel” (v. 15; 478). The gospel loses its efficacy if we try to change it (see Gal. 1:6–7). It is unusual that in the juxtaposition of God the Father and the Son, the Father

follows, rather than precedes, the Son (v. 16). God is the source of comfort and hope, in contrast to the deceitful comfort of the earth (v. 17; 479).

**Gottlieb Lünemann** (1819–94) firmly states that Paul gives thanks that the readers “were fore-ordained by God to salvation, and called to it by the gospel” (*Thessalonians*, 238). “From the beginning” does not refer to the chronology of Paul’s mission, but to election from eternity. Paul gives “the assurance of God’s peculiar love” (239). He concludes with the mention of God, who is the final reason for the readers’ salvation. To name Christ first before God underlines his role as Mediator (241). Paul’s aim is to provide “indestructible confidence” to his readers, anticipating Rom. 8:28, 38–9 (v. 17; 242).

**John Eadie** (1810–76) follows Lünemann’s understanding “from the beginning” as “eternal choice” (*Thessalonians*, 292). He adds, “The Spirit brings home the truth to the heart” (294). Yet Paul does not neglect the human part. Eadie writes, “Firmness in the midst of agitations, defections, and unsound novelties, is enjoined” (296). Paul prays for comfort and strength “to guard them on their way to ... glory, and to prepare them for it” (298). The clause “who loved us” reflects 1 John 4:10.

**Henry Alford** (1810–71) claims that Paul was “deeply conscious ... of the logical necessity of the only practical influence which man can draw from God’s gracious purposes to him. No human reasoning powers can connect the two – God’s sovereignty and man’s free will: all we know of them is that the one is as certain a truth as the other” (*Greek Testament*, 3.293). The more strongly we assert the one, he adds, we need to assert the other. “Hold fast” (Greek, *stēkete*) offers a contrast with “shaken” (*saleuthēnai*) in verse 2. The phrase “who loved us” refers to “a single fact – the love of the Father in sending his Son” (294). On a *bracing consolation* (*parakalisai*), Alford refers to 1 Thess. 3:11.

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) comments: “The Apostle ... desires to reiterate and enforce the directly practical lessons which in the previous Epistle he had already taught” (*Lectures Chiefly Expository*, 309). With the exception of passages about “the last things,” both epistles, he says, are more practical than doctrinal. The readers are “beloved of the Lord” (310). Hutchison quotes from Robert Browning to distinguish the various stages of the Christian life: “Deformed, transformed, reformed, informed, conformed” (*The Ring and the Book* 4.180). Hutchison further insists, “The call is given in the offer of the gospel” (312). The “duty of perseverance” is pressed upon the readers. They must hold the traditions with “tenacious grasp” (313). But God gives them a comfort “that is true, satisfying, enduring, never to be touched by time’s decay,” even in the midst of persecution (315).

**James Denney** (1856–1917) contrasts the mood of 2:1–12, which is “mysterious, awful, and oppressive” (*Thessalonians*, 341). Paul offers in vv. 13–14 “a system of theology in miniature” (342). He addresses the whole work of

salvation “from the eternal choice of God to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ in the world to come.” God’s choice is eternal. That also gives it a practical character in this passage. Salvation is realized in sanctification by the Holy Spirit (344). Like Jowett and Alford, Denney compares the human side and the divine side: “the Spirit opens the mind to the truth” (345). The end is to obtain the glory of Christ. It is a summary of God’s work. “Calvinism” does not destroy human motive and response (349).

# 2 Thessalonians

3:1–18

## **Further Prayer and Exhortation, Largely New Issues**

### **Further Prayer (2 Thess. 3:1–5)**

#### **Overview**

Chapter 3 begins with a request for prayer, which several earlier commentators have seen as a sign of apostolic humility. Paul asks for prayer in Rom. 15:20; 2 Cor. 1:11; and elsewhere. He values whatever the new converts may undertake for him, but especially their prayers. He had made a similar request in 1 Thess. 5:5. The

focus of this prayer remains not simply Paul himself in a personal sense. It is for the rapid spread of the gospel (v. 1; see Col. 4:3–4), and for the safety of its agents (v. 2). Paul acknowledges the reality of evil and opposition. The desire for the quick spread of the gospel may be fired by considerations about the future end, introduced in ch. 2. F. F. Bruce observes, “In praying for the missionaries, the converts were participating in the spread of the gospel” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 198).

Paul, however, is no less concerned for his co-workers; hence he still uses the plural “we.” The treasure of the gospel had been committed to fragile clay vessels (2 Cor. 4:7). Paul prays for his readers, so the request for prayer is mutual (v. 5). Paul constantly stresses the need for mutuality and reciprocity in other epistles (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:3–5; 11:6–13). He expresses his confidence in God, God’s care, God’s faithfulness, and in what God can do through his readers (v. 4). They will need steadfastness, which includes patience under suffering. “Christ’s steadfastness” may mean the steadfastness which Christ gives, or, more probably, Christ’s steadfastness as an example.

## The Apostolic Fathers and the Patristic Period

**Ignatius** (c. 35–107) writes “remember me,” and “pray for the Church which is in Syria,” when he left Syria on his way to Rome to be martyred (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 21). **Polycarp** (c. 69–c. 155) writes that it is the duty of presbyters not only to be compassionate, but also to be vigilant in prayer (*Epistle* 7). **The Shepherd of Hermas** (2nd century) declares, “Ask of the Lord, and you will receive all ... without doubting. But if you doubt in your heart, you will receive none of your requests” (*Hermas* 2.9; ANF 2.26).

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) writes: “The subjects of our prayers are the subjects of our requests ... and the objects of our desires. Pray, then, and desire to follow in order, with a view to possessing the blessings and advantages offered” (*Stromata* 7.7). Clement also quotes: “Pray that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for all men have not faith” (*Stromata* 5.3; ANF 2.448). The context is that of faith and hope as qualities of the mind, which some do not possess.

**Anterus of Rome** (c. 235) quotes both 2 Thess. 2:15–17 and 3:1–3 in his epistle. He writes, “Finally, my brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified everywhere ... and that we may be delivered from all ... wicked men: for all have not faith ... But the Lord is faithful who will establish you” (Conclusion, *The Decretals: The Epistle of Pope Anterus*; ANF 8.629).

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) has much material on prayer. He considers objections to prayer (*On Prayer* 5.1, ch. 7); the benefits of praying “as we ought” (8.1–10.2); and “what we should pray” (14.1–17.2). The latter includes petitionary and

intercessory prayer, as in 2 Thess. 3:1–5. He declares, “Supplication is a prayer offered with entreaty ... Intercession is a petition for certain things addressed to God by someone who has greater boldness” (14.1). He uses many Old Testament examples, and cites Rom. 8:26–7, for the Spirit’s evoking Christian intercession (14.5). He appeals to the example of Jesus, and concludes, “Let us make supplication as of a Lord” (16.1). (Please see above, on 1 Thessalonians.)

**Basil the Great** (c. 330–379) cites 2 Thess. 3:5: “The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patient waiting for Christ” (although some dispute the MS reading; Basil, *On the Spirit* 21.52; NPNF2 33). Basil appeals to scripture for calling the Spirit Lord. He asks, “Who is the Lord that directs [us] into the love of God?” Paul must mean the Holy Spirit, as he does in 2 Cor. 3:17.

**Ambrose of Milan** (c. 338–397) cites the same verse even more explicitly. Paul “knowingly” designated the Holy Spirit “Lord,” “whom he felt to be God, [and] repeated the same in the Second Epistle, saying: ‘The Lord direct your hearts in the love of God and in the patience of Christ’ ... The Lord who directs ... is the Holy Spirit” (*Of the Holy Spirit* 14.97; NPNF2 10.149).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) writes at greater length. He notes that Paul has already prayed for his readers; now he entreats them to pray for him (*Homily* 4; NPNF1 13.390). Prayer is mutual. He asks both that the word of God may be well received, and that he may be delivered from evil people. He adds, “Here he [Paul] seems to me not to glance at dangers” (NPNF1 13.391). He said this, Chrysostom asserts, “to comfort his disciples.” He is aware of the “littleness” of the readers and their church, but Paul’s confidence is in God. Hezekiah provides an example from the Old Testament, however strong Assyria may have seemed. Chrysostom is eager for present Christians to learn from this. He warns us, “Each of you indeed anxiously thinks of his own interests ... The devil is more violently armed against us ... Do you observe Paul constantly seeking these prayers?” He compares the promise of Jesus in Matt. 20:18. The mutuality of Paul and his readers is clear: “that you may be our boast; and we, yours; in the day of Christ” (*Homily* 4; NPNF1 13.292). Great “are the things which prayer for us can effect” (vv. 3–5). This rests on the faithfulness of God. Paul has confidence to “trust to his loving kindness” (*Homily* 5; NPNF1 13.293).

**Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430) suggests that Paul’s request for prayer constitutes an example of *humility*, and an occasion of love (*Expositions*, 447). Prayer is needed, because not all have faith, and may be hostile. But God will strengthen the readers, and guard them from evil (448).

**Augustine** (354–430) quotes the phrase, “All men have not faith” (2 Thess. 3:2b), but he immediately assimilates this into “those wishing to be justified by the law,” who have fallen from grace (Gal. 2:21; *On Grace and Free Will* 13.25; NPNF1 5.454). He cites the same phrase in *On the Predestination of the Saints* 10 (NPNF1 5.503). Since the contrast between grace and law becomes explicit in Galatians and Romans, but not as early as Thessalonians, this is a comment

on Paul, rather than an exegesis of this passage. On the other hand, Augustine declares, “This gift of God [perseverance] may be obtained by prayer, but when it has been given, it cannot be lost” (*On the Gift of Perseverance* 6.10). Augustine stresses the special quality of the word of God, to which Paul alludes in 3:1. It can “spread rapidly” (v. 1) because, as Augustine urges, it is unlike our human words. Human words cannot be “true” in every respect (*On the Trinity*, 15.15.24; NPNF1 3.213).

Where Paul speaks of being rescued from evil men, Augustine has much material on evil and evil people (see v. 2). God “is the author and maker of everything good” (*On the Catechising of the Uninstructed* 18.30). “There are two communities, one of the ungodly, and another of the holy” (19.31). Since they are mixed together in the world, the righteous may suffer from the wicked. The slavery of Israel in Egypt and their captivity in Babylon provide examples of suffering which God turned to good. Augustine quotes 2 Thess. 3:2, “All men have not faith” (*On the Predestination of the Saints* 1.10) to speak of faith as a gift of God. He also quotes 3:1 on the prayer that the word of God may “run and be glorified,” that is, be received with honor. This is not the case “among all,” but among “chosen” believers (*Letters* 217.7.27; FC 32.93–4). He also comments that prayer should be mutual (*Sermons* 13.10; FC 11.354–5).

**John Cassian** (c. 360–after 430) includes much on prayer in his writings. In *The First Conference of Abbot Isaac* he first refers to his own discourse on prayer in *Institutes* 2.9, and urges “unbroken perseverance in prayer” (*First Conference* 2; NPNF2 11.387). Prayer is to be offered with “earnestness and purity,” and free from anxiety about earthly things (3; 388). “Intercessions” for others are important, “either for those dear to us or for the peace of the whole world” (see 1 Tim. 2:1–2; *First Conference of Abbot Isaac* 13; NPNF2 11.391–2; see further above).

## The Medieval Era

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) takes up the phrase which Aquinas will expound: “for not all have faith” (“*non enim omnium fides est . . . non omnes credunt*”; PL 112.574). They contradict the truth. But God has called the readers, he says, in good hope, and will strengthen you in faith. Paul’s confidence rests on the Lord.

**Haimo of Auxerre** (c. 810–c. 875) expands on “that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly” (3:1), speaking of this word hastening “from our [Paul’s] mouth to your [the reader’s] ears, and from your ears to your heart, and thus be turned into works” (*Second Thessalonians*, 31). He comments, “Whatever strength you have, may he [the Lord] strengthen you, and make you walk the straight path of life, fixing your steps firmly in doing good” (v. 5; 31). The readers’ patience must reflect Christ’s. Haimo does not simply replicate the church fathers, but expands the passage with explicit application.

**Thietland of Einsiedeln** (d. 965) repeats the comment of Pelagius that for Paul to request his readers' prayers is an "act of humility" (*Second Thessalonians*, 64). But Paul was certain of "who was a vessel of election." Of those who might cause trouble for Paul, "We should call this a deep blindness." The saints are closer to God, even if none is like Paul. "There are those who are stirred to tears by love of the heavenly kingdom and consideration of its creator" (64). Thietland cites Job 9:31 to speak of cleansing, and compares Acts 1:18, Ps. 50:16, and 1 Cor. 15:9 (65). Paul admits that his eloquence cannot prevail, but God is faithful, "so that they may become more certain of the promises" (66). God will strengthen and guard them. Paul adds a prayer, "teaching them to pray" (67). It is "the steadfastness of Christ that steadfastly bore death for us" (67).

**Thomas Aquinas** (c. 1225–74) asks whether Christian theology constitutes a science (*scientia*). At first sight "science advances from self-evident principles." Yet Christian theology advances from articles of faith, and these are not self-evident. For "Not all have faith" (2 Thess. 3:2; *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu. 1, art. 2). But Aquinas replies: "science alone" *nourishes* faith. "Christian theology should be pronounced a science" (art. 2). Aquinas deals with prayer extensively in 3, qu. 83, arts. 1–17. He declares that "Prayer (*oratio*) is a spoken reason" (*oris ratio*; 3, qu. 83, art. 1). It signifies petition. But "we pray not that we may change the Divine disposition, but that we may ... receive what Almighty God from eternity has disposed to give, as Gregory says" (art. 2). "Man shows reverence to God by means of prayer" (art. 3). Aquinas adds, "When in our prayers we ask for things concerning our salvation, we *conform our wills to God's*" (art. 4, my emphasis). "Fraternal charity urges us to pray for others" (art. 7). Aquinas also declares, "It is becoming that prayer should last long enough to arouse the fervour of internal desire" (art. 14). This reflects Paul's request for prayer and his prayer for others. On the word of the Lord (3:1–2) Aquinas discusses how grace may be embodied in words, or in a "word of wisdom" (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 177, art. 1). He speaks of "the grace of the word," of the need to "listen to God's word" (qu. 177, art. 1). He cites 1 Cor. 2:4: "My speech was not in plausible words of human wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and power" (art. 1, reply to obj. 2). He concludes, "The grace of the word is directed to the profit of others" (reply to obj. 4).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**John Calvin** (1509–64) argued, "Paul ... surpassed everyone else in his earnest prayers. Nevertheless he did not despise the prayers of believers. So we must follow his example, eagerly desire divine help, and stir up our Christian brothers and sisters to pray for us, through which the Lord plans to help us" (*Commentary*,

101, v. 1). Paul was not simply thinking of himself when he prayed that the word of the Lord would spread rapidly. He did not want his readers simply to focus on him, but on the effectiveness of the gospel. Those who might hinder the gospel (v. 2) “were treacherous people who lurked in the church, bearing the name of Christians, or at least Jews” (102). Paul wrote this on his way to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22–3). The sentence “Not everyone has faith” remains “ambiguous and obscure,” even if it is widely a source of comment. Many are not “true believers.” Even in the church some are disloyal and treacherous. But whatever failings humans may have, God remains faithful (v. 3). He will keep to his purposes Calvin asserts: “Paul was more concerned about the welfare of the Thessalonians than about his own welfare” (103). Hence Paul has confidence in the Lord (v. 4). He appeals to the love of God and to the perseverance of Christ (v. 5). “Waiting for the Redeemer ... sustains us in the warfare of the present life” (104).

Calvin provides a systematic study of prayer in 52 sections (*Institutes* 3.20; tr. Beveridge 2.143–201). Prayer is “contemplation of God” (3.20.4; 2.148). “We are to ask only in so far as God permits (3.20.5; 2.149). Prayer entails the whole person, including feelings, and gives glory to God (3.20.6–8; 150–3). It brings “sure hope of succeeding” (3.20.11; 2.155). Prayer involves trust. We especially call upon God “in the day of trouble” (Ps. 1:15; 3.20.13; 2.158). All praying is through Christ (3.20.17; 2.65). This coheres with 3:1–5. Calvin calls attention to “the preaching of the Word,” even when he is attacking the use of images (*Institutes* 1.11.7; 2.96); “Hear, and your soul shall live” (Isa. 55:3; 3.2.6; 2.473). “The Holy Scriptures are too mighty in the power of truth to need the rhetorician’s art” (*Institutes* 1.8.1; 1.75). As far as the providence of God is concerned, “Nothing takes place save according to his appointment . . . , “Under his wings shalt thou trust; his truth shall be thy shield and buckler” (1.17.11; 1.193). The whole coheres with Calvin’s exegesis in his commentary.

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) explicitly cites two verses (vv. 1–2) in a context relevant to this passage. He speaks more widely of the preaching of the gospel, but first wishes to note the difference between those who respond and those who fail to do so. He observes that God’s truth may be “revealed to babes” (Matt. 11:25), but that not all respond (Matt. 10:11–13). “The Jews of Berea” were more “noble” than those in Thessalonica, and received the word “with all readiness of mind” (Acts 17:11). Then he quotes our verses: “Pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course ... The Lord is faithful” (2 Thess. 3:1–2; Arminius, *Works*, 1, art. 8, 156). The second reference to 3:2 occurs in a different context. He addresses “Vocation to Salvation.” He rejects Calvin’s “double predestination,” stating: “The accidental result of vocation, and that which is not of itself intended by God, is the rejection of the word of grace ... The result is ... blinding of the mind, [and] the hardening of the heart” (*Works*, 1, *Disputation* 16.14, 306). His thought perhaps goes further than Paul’s here, who does not discuss God’s “intention.”

**John Owen** (1616–83) writes *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance* in which he rejects “the giving of grace according to merit” (*Works*, 11.191). “God freely bestows on persons, of his own pleasure, his gifts and graces” (190). “Fear not . . . separation from God (the only thing to be feared)” (195). This would be a “most pressing temptation.” But believers must trust to the faithfulness of God, and be consoled. This is Paul’s message in 3:1–5.

## The Eighteenth Century

**William Law** (1686–1761) published his *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* in 1728. He writes, “That intercession is a great and necessary part of Christian devotion is very evident from Scripture . . . St. Paul, whether he writes to Churches or to particular people, shows his intercession to be perpetual for them that are the constant subject of his prayers” (Phil. 1:3–4; 2 Tim. 1:3; *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, ch. 21, 291). He prays with joy, and as an act of friendship. Thus his readers also pray for him (see 2 Cor. 1:11). We must therefore “habituate” our heart to a “serious performance of this holy intercession.”

**John Gill** (1697–1771) speaks of “calling” as “efficacious and irresistible grace.” The “internal” call is by the Holy Spirit. “The external ministry of the word, or the outward call by it, is not in vain.” People dwell together, believers and unbelievers, but believers have been called “by his grace effectually . . . out of the world . . . by the ministry of the word . . . out of gross darkness” (“God’s Grace to the Elect,” *Body of Divinity*).

**John Wesley** (1703–91) writes in 1754 that all who “have not faith” (v. 2) are “unreasonable and wicked” people. He understands “glorified” to mean “acknowledged as divine” (*Notes*, 701). God will establish all that “cleave to him by faith.” “The Lord” (v. 5) implies the Holy Spirit, who will lead us into the presence of Christ. John Wesley translated a hymn by **Nicholas von Zinzendorf** (1700–60), which contains the verse:

To Thy sure love, Thy tender care,  
Our flesh, soul, spirit, we resign;  
O fix Thy sacred presence there,  
And seal the abode for ever Thine.

(*Methodist Hymn Book*, 63)

**John Newton** (1725–1807) and his friend **William Cowper** (1731–1800) have many references to prayer in their *Olney Hymns*. The following hymn by William Cowper is the best known:

What various hindrances we meet  
 In coming to the mercy-seat!  
 Yet who that knows the worth of prayer,  
 But wishes to be often there.  
 Prayer makes the darken'd cloud withdraw  
 Prayer climbs the ladder Jacob saw;  
 Gives exercise to faith and love  
 Brings ev'ry blessing from above.  
 Have you no words? Ah! Think again.  
 Words flow apace when you complain,  
 And fill your fellow creature's ear,  
 With the sad tale of all you are.  
 Were half the breath thus vainly spent,  
 To heaven in supplication sent,  
 Your cheerful song would oft'ner be,  
 "Hear what the Lord has done for me."

(Newton, *Works*, 3.590)

John Newton composed a short single-verse hymn about passing through times of trial and looking confidently to Jesus:

We seek a rest beyond the skies,  
 In everlasting day;  
 Through floods and flames the passage lies,  
 But Jesus guards the way:  
 The swelling flood, and raging flame,  
 Hear and obey his word;  
 Then let us triumph in his name,  
 Our Saviour is the Lord.

(Newton, *Works*, 3.633)

## The Nineteenth Century

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93) notes, like others, that Paul asks prayer “for the success of the gospel,” as well as for deliverance from persecution (*Epistles*, 170). But the readers are also “to withdraw from the authors of disorder among you.” God is faithful, even though false brothers are not (v. 4). The Greek *tou ponērou* may be either in the masculine, meaning *the evil one* or in the neuter, meaning *evil*. The former may point back to the Antichrist in 2:1–12, but the latter is preferred as “simpler.” Jowett declares concerning v. 4: “It is characteristic of St Paul to admonish and in the form of praise” (172). In v. 5, the readers are to trust, just as Paul trusts. The genitive “of Christ” may be objective, meaning

“patient waiting for Christ.” But it may be subjective, meaning “the patience which Christ gives” (173).

**Henry Alford** (1810–71) believes that “those who have no faith” refers to Jews at Corinth. They were Paul’s adversaries at the very time of writing (*Greek Testament*, 3.295). Paul’s thoughts turn to an enlargement of what God has already made them. Although “patient waiting for Christ” has a strong place in interpretation, the Greek *hupomonē* will not bear this meaning. It means endurance or patience (296).

**James Denney** (1856–1917) heads this section “Mutual Intercession” (*Thessalonians*, 359–72). Paul sought the strength and comfort of knowing that those who loved him carried him into the presence of God. This would support him when he faced “barriers and restraints of every description” (360). He longs that the glory of God may be acknowledged. Like others, Denney leaves to God the manner in which Paul would be delivered. Then Paul turns to the needs of his readers (367). This mutuality helps to explain “the joyous, open, hopeful spirit” of the New Testament church (369). “The Lord direct your hearts” (v. 5) shows Paul’s affection for his readers: “Prayer is his very element” (370). Denney adds, “Our Saviour himself had need of patience” (372).

## Exhortation and Admonition about “Idlers” or Undisciplined People (2 Thess. 3:6–13)

### Introduction and Overview

Paul has already addressed the “idlers” (Greek, *ataktoi*), first mildly in 1 Thess. 4:9–12, and then as a “command” in 1 Thess. 5:14. In 2 Thess. 3:6–13 he twice uses the adverb *ataktōs* (vv. 6, 11) and the verb *ētaktēsamen* (v. 7). Paul contrasts “working for a living” or everyday work in 3:12, with not being a burden on any of you (v. 8). Many translate *ataktoi* as “idlers.” But Robert Jewett follows C. Spicq in understanding the Greek to mean “standing against the order or nature of God.” In military use, it means “not keeping step,” or “not following orders.” Frederick W. Danker renders *ataktos* “pertaining to being out of step and going one’s own way” (1 Thess. 5:14), or as “being without socially recognized restraint, undisciplined” (*Greek–English Lexicon*, 148). W. Marxsen and Robert Jewett relate it to a sense of the nearness of the Parousia, which might imply “no longer taking seriously the things of everyday life” (Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, 104). This group sponged on the church congregation, while opting out of “paying their way.” This would become poignant if some worked in a workshop below, while others simply took part in communal meals above.

Paul also appeals to the common pre-Pauline apostolic tradition: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” The tradition finds expression elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul expounds it in 1 Cor. 9:1–14; 2 Cor. 11:7–11; Phil. 3:17–21; and 1 Thess. 2:9–12; 4:9–12; 5:12–22. He quotes the words of Jesus (Matt. 10:10).

## The Subapostolic and Patristic Periods

The *Didache* (c. 90–120) does not explicitly quote 2 Thess. 3:6–13, but is sensitive about Christian teachers or prophets working, and not being a burden on the church. Every apostle or prophet is to be welcomed (Greek, *dechthētō*), but if he stays three days, “he is a false prophet” (*Didache* 11.3). Prophets must be tested in the light of their behavior, especially if they ask for food, lodging, or money (11.8–12). “If he wishes to settle among you ... let him work for his bread ... No man shall live among you in idleness (Greek, *argos*) because he is a Christian” (12.3–5).

**Irenaeus** (c. 130–c. 200) appeals to “the tradition,” as Paul does in v. 6. He declares that when controversy arises, we “have recourse to the most ancient churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse” (*Against Heresies* 3.4.1).

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) attacks Marcion for failing to recognize, as we have seen, that 2 Thessalonians forms an indispensable part of the gospel. This includes its maxim: “If any will not work, neither should he eat.” He refers, as Paul does, to “the one that treadeth out the corn” (Deut. 25:4; 1 Cor. 9:9; *Against Marcion* 5.16; ANF 3.464). He reaffirms, “Each one should work with his own hands for a living” (*On Idolatry* 5; ANF 3.63). He adds, “Let the Church stand open to *all* who are supported by their hands and by their own work” (5; 63). Tertullian defends Paul’s consistency, and attacks a Gnostic devaluing of the physical. He writes, “If ... a brother ... walks idly” (2 Thess. 3:6), he warns them “to withdraw themselves” (*On Modesty* 18; ANF 3.94). Tertullian alludes to “the disorderly” for the fourth time; they provoke Paul to sadness (*On Modesty* 14; ANF 3.88).

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) similarly believed in the importance of “the tradition” or rule of faith (v. 6b). Tradition meant “investigation of the logical consequences of the Scriptures and adherence to accuracy” (Preface, *First Principles* 10). Yet whereas for Irenaeus this tradition was public, for Origen it could be secret, transmitted by followers “whom he [God] knew to be fit to receive mysteries impossible to be put into words” (*Hom. Jos.*, 23.4). There are doctrines “which do not reach the majority of people” (*Against Celsus* 1.7). We noted this earlier.

**Cyprian** (d. 258) quotes 3:6, “We command you ... that you withdraw from every brother who walks in a disorderly way,” but in a different context. His chief concern is the Donatist controversy, where he writes to his “dearest brother,” Cornelius, not to hear the charges against him, or be swayed by threats. Each side charged the other with breaking ranks, or with “disorder.” Many Christians fell away from confessing the faith under the brief Decian persecution. The Roman Church was more inclined to show generosity towards lapsed than Cyprian. Cyprian kept up a polemical correspondence with Rome. He declares, “There can be no fellowship between faith and faithlessness” (*Epistles* 54.13; ANF 5.347). He includes another reference to 2 Thess. 3:6 as a command to withdraw from “the disorderly,” commenting, “We must withdraw ... from those who fall away ... lest we should be found in like guilt. God is one ... Unity cannot be severed” (*Treatise* 1.23; ANF 5.429).

**Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 330–395) refers to 3:8: “Neither did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it” (NRSV; Gregory, *Against Eunomius* 1.10; NPNF2 5.45). He remonstrates that Eunomius has not merely defended his views, but has offered “laboriously written abuse” against Basil (*Against Eunomius*, Letter 1). He takes up the false accusation that Basil was an enemy of the truth and inconsistent. On the contrary, Gregory comments, he gave ungrudgingly to the poor, and as a presbyter earned his income. He was never idle. Basil had quoted Paul on “the disorderly” (*On Baptism*; FC 9.66–7), and comments on “the amount of evil there is in idleness” (*The Long Rules*, qu. 37; FC 9.307).

The *Apostolic Constitutions* (350–370) urge Christians, “Mind your business ... , so that you may always have sufficient to support yourselves and those that are needy, and not burden the Church of God ... ; that we may never be idle, says Solomon somewhere, ‘Go to the ant, those sluggard ...’ (Prov. 6:6, LXX). ‘He that manages his land shall be filled with bread’ (Prov. 12:11) ... Labour continually ... ‘If anyone does not work, let not such a one eat’” (2 Thess. 3:10) (*Apostolic Constitutions* 2.8; ANF 7.424–5). We know little about this writing, other than it gives practical instruction for Christians.

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) on vv. 7–9 elaborates briefly on Paul’s example. He had the right (*potestatem*) to support, but determined to offer an example, preferring to work “night and day” (v. 8), rather than to eat bread without payment (*gratis*). He taught not only by words but also by deeds (*Commentarius*, 3.245–6). Ambrosiaster concludes, “Because no one can live without food, he gives the work of labour so that he can have grace in the eyes of God, making his living by his own will” (v. 10; 246). “For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work” (v. 11; *curiose agentes, qui otiose esse desiderant*, 246). They want to hear fine words, but they should eat their own bread, working quietly (v. 12).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) stresses, “Religious attitudes never substitute for hard work.” “In the name of Christ” (v. 6) underlines that the “command” is not Paul’s, but Christ’s. It is a “fearful” message (*Homily on 2 Thessalonians* 5; NPNF1 13.293). Chrysostom quotes “The labourer is worthy of his hire” (Luke 10:7). Although he has the “right” to do otherwise, Paul labors night and day, to be an example: “if any will not work, neither shall he eat” (v. 10). The “disordered” forget that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Chrysostom observes, “To pray and fast, being idle, is not the work of the hands” (*Homily* 5; NPNF1 13.394). “Be not weary in well doing” (v. 13) means that Paul does not want to reprove the readers further. Chrysostom also refers to “the disorderly” and 2 Thess. 3:6 in his *Homily on Romans*. The readers or hearers must “withdraw from every brother that walks” (Greek, *ataktōs*) or acts “contrary to doctrine” (*Homily on Romans* 32; Rom. 16:17–18; NPNF1 11.560).

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) takes up 2 Thess. 3:6–13. The Latin text translates the Greek word “*ataktōs*” as “*inordinate ambulante*” (*Commentarii*, 2.61), and later equates it with “*indisciplinatis dicere*.” By contrast Paul urges his readers to imitate him, as they reflect on his conduct and visit. He never sought food *gratis* (62), but labored night and day to pay his way. Paul said this, in effect, to the Corinthians (63).

**Augustine** (354–430) has various discussions of 2 Thess. 3:6–13 and related texts. He addresses this in *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament* 58.1–2 (NPNF1 6.440). He speaks of “manual craft . . . lawful in itself,” and of Paul “who worked with his own hands for support” (3:8; *On the Gospel of John* 122.3; NPNF1 7.440). Working for a living “was not imposed on the apostles as a necessity, but conferred on them as a power” (*On John* 122.3). Augustine also quotes from 2 Thess. 3:6–13 several times in *On the Work of Monks*. He cites 3:10: “If any will not work, neither let him eat” (*On the Work of Monks* 1; NPNF1 3.503), and repeats the aphorism in section 4 (NPNF1 3.505). He then quotes 3:6–12 in full. None has license to interpret this passage “according to wish, not according to charity” (sect. 4). A Christian minister or monk is to “make himself a pattern to those who desired what was not their due.” Paul gave this precept to those who did not enjoy Paul’s freedom; they should not “eat bread by corporal labour not earned” (Latin, *gratuitum*; 4; 505). Augustine then expounds 1 Cor. 9:1–7. In sect. 9 he returns to 2 Thess. 3:6–12. The sustenance of life may be due to evangelists, but not to any or every Christian (*On the Work of Monks* 10; NPNF1 3.508). Jesus worked with his hands as a carpenter (sect. 14). Paul did a “marvellous thing,” namely to accept support only when not to do so would hinder the gospel, yet to carry “the care of all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:9; sect. 15; NPNF1 3.511). He returns to these verses in sect. 22, and to 2 Thess. 3:13 in *On the Work of Monks* 38 (NPNF1 3.522). Augustine also considers v. 8 in relation to “Take no thought for tomorrow” (*Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount* 2.57; NPNF1 6.52–3). Paul, Aquila, and

Priscilla made a living in Corinth, and did not imitate the birds of the air. Christ does not “disapprove” of earning a living; he wants us to fix our eyes on the kingdom of God. We live in the real world, where Christians face tribulations and need patience and endurance. This does not mean that the promises of God have wavered (*Sermon on the Mount* 2.10; NPNF 6.53). Augustine often asked how exegesis of a particular passage related to the Bible and to systematic theology as a whole.

**John Cassian** (c. 360–after 430) writes his *Institutes* as rules for monastic life. They later influenced Benedict. His *Conferences* are conversations with the leaders of eastern monasticism. He devotes book 10 of his *Institutes* to lethargy and idleness. In ch. 7 he appeals to Paul’s words in 2 Thess. 3:6–13 to “work with your own hands,” and not to be anxious about other people’s affairs. Leisure and gossip can become evil (*Institutes* 10.7; NPNF2 11.269). He continues the theme in 8–24, in the remainder of book 10. Paul has eaten no bread free of charge at Thessalonica (chs. 8–9), though he is entitled “to live by the gospel” (see 1 Cor. 9:14; Matt. 10:10). Paul worked night and day, “lest we should be burdensome to any of you” (2 Thess. 3:8). His aim was to provide an example by life, and not simply by words (ch. 10). He writes, “If any will not work, neither shall he eat” (2 Thess. 3:10), with “the severity of a judicial sentence.” He specifically addresses those who are “disorderly,” and who depart from apostolic traditions (ch. 13). Manual labor can prevent many faults (ch. 14). Idleness forms the root of many problems. But Paul mixes this with kindness: “Do not weary in well-doing” (2 Thess. 3:13; ch. 15). Laziness must be avoided in a monastery (ch. 20). The book of Proverbs adds examples (ch. 21; Prov. 28:19; 23:21, LXX; *Institutes* 10.7–21; NPNF2 11.268–74).

**Cyril of Alexandria** (d. 444) speaks of those who pretend “to devote themselves to prayer, doing no work, making piety a pretext for cowardice and a means of gaining a living, but not thinking rightly . . . How did they miss reading the holy Paul?” (*Letters* 83.7). He then alludes to Paul in 2 Thess. 3:6–13. His denunciation is blistering.

## The Medieval Period

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) understands the Pauline *ataktoi* to mean “*ambulante inordinate*” (PL 112.576). He suggests a synonym for the Thessalonians text “*subtrahite vos*” (NRSV “keep away from”; v. 6) as *separate*. He notes that Paul was not “restless” (*inquietus*), and did not take food for nothing. He quotes Cassian on the dangers of being idle.

**Thietland of Einsiedeln** (d. 965) states that exhortation to adhere to “the tradition” is the “special purpose of this epistle” (2 *Thessalonians*, 67). The “tradition” embodies both *words and deeds*. On Paul’s example he observes, “They

sweated day and night in labour and toil ... Labour refers to night, and toil to day” (68). Paul’s motivation in the case of Corinth was different. This was not only a matter of “not being a burden to the church,” but because Corinth expected something *in return*. His motive is “to please God” (69). Some were simply concerned with their own needs, not those of others. “The false apostles” presented themselves as preachers, in order to gain food. Thietland implies that their love of gossip might be passed on in their sermons. “Curiosity” (*cura*) is an evil which masquerades as “concern” (also *cura*).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) specifically addressed the question of manual labor, mainly with reference to 1 Thess. 4:11 and 2 Thess. 3:10 (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 187, art. 3). He asks “Whether the Religious are Bound to Manual Labour?” He asserts: “It would seem that the religious are bound to manual labour ... ‘If any will not work, neither shall he eat’” (art. 3, obj. 1 and 2). He further quotes Augustine. Reading and prayer, says Augustine, do not substitute for hard work. 2 Thess. 3:6 and 10 are both quoted. By way of reply Aquinas asserts that manual labor has four purposes: (1) to obtain food; (2) to prevent idleness; (3) to keep under the body; and (4) to make almsgiving possible. But “manual” labor may include use of the eyes (like a watchman), use of the tongue (like a teacher), and other faculties, for the same purposes. Work of some kind belongs to “the natural order” of being human. Hence Paul calls those in view *the disorderly*, those who are out of step with the natural order. Different kinds of work correspond to the different parts of the body. The implication of Aquinas’s third article is important for eschatology. Christians are a new creation, but they are not yet removed from the world and the “natural order.” The apostles sometimes “worked with their hands” as a matter of “necessity”; at other times as a matter of “supererogation”; also to give an example to others (2 Thess. 3:8–9; art. 3, reply to obj. 5).

**John Wycliffe** (c. 1333–84) also interpreted “labor” in a broad sense. He discusses cathedral canons and those in colleges or endowed parishes. There are “falsely appointed curates or pastors ... who do not labour fruitfully in that office, to whom that statement of the apostle could be applied, ‘He who toils not, let him not eat’ (2 Thess. 3:10)” (*Pastoral Office* 9, 39).

**John Huss** (1371–1415) of Prague, often associated with Wycliffe, wrote *On Simony* (1413), which is relevant to 2 Thess. 3:6–13. Simony is the holding of a plurality of livings by one person, in such a way as to generate an excessive income for relatively little work. Huss condemned it as “an error contrary to the Scriptures” (*On Simony* 1, in Spinka (ed.), *Advocates of Reform*, 196). It is the third heresy, after apostasy and blasphemy (199). Huss called it “trafficking in holy things” (201). He writes, “Few priests ... secured their ... their benefices without simony ... They and their bishops ... have fallen into simony” (203). “It is fitting to examine how a bishop may fall into simony” (222). It is contrary to Paul’s maxim: “bearing food and raiment, let us be content ...” (1 Tim. 6:8–11). Love of money leads to many ills. Many chaplains suffer dire poverty, while many priests receive much more

than they need. But Paul asserts, “You ought to imitate us . . . If any would not work, neither should he eat” (2 Thess. 3:7, 8, 10). “Woe,” Huss writes, “to the canons . . . bishops . . . and prelates who eat, gorge themselves, guzzle, and feast abundantly, but in spiritual matters amount to nothing” (*On Simony* 7; p. 247).

**Thomas à Kempis** (1380–1471) writes in *Of the Imitation of Christ*: “Never be completely idle, but either reading or writing, or praying, or meditating, or working at something useful for all in common” (line 4).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) alludes to 2 Thess. 3:10 several times in his *Commentary on 1 Timothy* (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:9 and 5:18, “The labourer is worthy of his hire”). He also cites Heb. 13:5, “Be content with what you have.” He adds, “See to it that you work with your hands in such a way that you do not place it [bodily training] above godliness.” Luther, however, also seems to “spiritualize” 2 Thess. 3:10. A minister of the gospel should not work with his hands, in cases “where his office requires it” (*Commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7 and 15 and Lectures on 1 Timothy*, 324). He quotes Paul against “the Enthusiasts”: “If anyone will not work, let him not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10), where, he claims, *work* includes “working in the word” (349). While he opposed Rome, Luther also opposed the “radical” Enthusiasts. Many among these were so ardent in extolling the laity under the banner of the “priesthood of all believers” that they risked demeaning the clerical office altogether. Luther stresses that Paul speaks of their legitimate right to a stipend, even if some, like Paul himself, choose to forgo this right. He thus interprets Paul in the light of other Pauline texts.

Luther agrees with the “radical” reformers that “those who preside over the sacraments or the Word . . . neither can nor ought to be called *priests*.” This is a “borrowing from heathen ritual or a relic of Jewish practice . . . They would better be called ministers, deacons, bishops” (1 Corinthians 4; Luther, *On the Appointment of Ministers* 3; 1523). They have no “indelible character” (against Rome), but should be given expenses or a stipend (against the radical Reformers) (see also Luther, *Wittenberg Sermons: The Ordinance for a Common Chest at Leisnig, 1523*; see Rupp and Drewery [eds.], *Martin Luther*, 103–4).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) comments Paul now addresses “some lazy people who were also curious and who never stopped spreading gossip” (*Commentary*, 104). They wandered from house to house, scraping together a living at other people’s expense. Paul does not wish the Thessalonian church to encourage this by their generosity. “Idleness,” Calvin writes, “causes disorder” (104). Work is part of the rule of God. Without his correct regulation “nothing but confession remains” (104). Idleness means living only for oneself. “Withdraw” in 2 Thess.

3:6 does not refer to public dealings, but to private fellowship. Like vermin, these idlers can pollute the Christian faith. Paul's personal example illustrates the tradition (v. 8). He engaged in "hard manual labour" (105). On v. 9 Calvin comments that Paul did not want the Thessalonians to be like drones, which live on the work of other bees. His teaching recalls Prov. 10:4, "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth." Humankind was created to do something. "Work" includes a range of activities. Calvin comments, "Whatever helps society in general ... through bringing up a family, through the administration of public or private affairs, by counselling, or teaching, or working in any other way, is not to be numbered with the idle" (106). Some monks and priests live pampered lives. He refers to Augustine's denunciation of lazy monks who appeal to holiness to exempt them from work! But Paul names such as busybodies: "People should not swallow up ... everything that belongs to others" (107).

Calvin appeals to 2 Thess. 3:6 on the doctrine of the church. He writes, "Those who lived disorderly among the Thessalonians ... are still invited to repentance ... whole churches have been implicated in the grossest sins" (*Institutes* 4.1:26–7; tr. Beveridge, 2.301). There is a "visible" church. A second reference comes in an obscure analogy which is meant to support infant baptism (*Institutes* 4.16.29; 2 Thess. 3:10). Calvin seems to say that the maxim about working for food might be taken by wooden literalists to refer to babies, but common sense would not lead us to deprive them of food. Hence we must take care not to use special pleading against their baptism.

**Richard Hooker** (c. 1554–1600), a Church of England theologian who stressed reason, tolerance, and the Bible, was well suited to the reign of Elizabeth I. He proposed a *Via Media* between Rome and the Puritans, and had enormous influence in shaping Anglicanism. His most famous work, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastic Polity*, concerns the nature of the church and its relation to the state (1594 onwards, in eight books). He attacks the assumption that ministers should not labor in a craft, contrasting the words of Paul as eminently reasonable in 2 Thess. 3:8; 1 Thess. 1:9; and 1 Cor. 4:12, as according with laws of nature (*Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* 5.81.9; *Works*, 2.522).

**Thomas Decker** (c. 1572–1632) poet, playwright, and dramatist, wrote *Patient Grissel*, which was mentioned in 1599. It contains the well-known lullaby, "Golden slumbers kiss your eyes." He wrote on work:

Dost thou laugh to see how fools are vexed  
 To add to golden numbers, golden numbers?  
 O, sweet content, O sweet, O sweet content!  
 Work apace, apace, apace, apace;  
 Honest labour bears a lovely face.

(*Patient Grissel*, act 1)

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) reflects that Paul had already addressed the question of “the unruly” in 1 Thess. 5:14, where he spoke with greater mildness. Now he uses the term “command” (2 Thess. 3:6). “Disorderly” means “not walking according to rule” (*Commentary*, 3.769). Is this withdrawal or excommunication? It is probably “abstaining from communion,” like purging out the old leaven (1 Cor. 5:7). Paul’s own example (v. 7) aggravates the guilt of the lazy and disorderly. Paul does not recall his conduct for self-commendation, but by way of example. Poole writes concerning v. 10, “God requires it of us as men that we ... supply our own wants and of those that depend on us, and have wherewith also to supply the wants of the poor” (770).

## The Eighteenth Century

**Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) writes, “Christianity is not to countenance slothfulness, which would consume what is meant to encourage the industrious, and to support the sick and afflicted. Industry is our calling as men, is a duty inspired by our calling as Christians. Some expected to be maintained in idleness, and indulged a curious and conceited temper” (*Concise Commentary*, on 3:6). He adds an eschatological dimension. He continues: “The servant who waits for the coming of his Lord aright must be working, as his Lord commanded. If we are idle, the devil and a corrupt heart will soon find us somewhat to do ... We must never ... tire in our work. It will be time enough to rest when we come to *heaven*.”

**Johann Albrecht Bengel** (1687–1752) may be the first to state: “The Thessalonians ... seem to have ceased working because of the nearness of the day of Christ” (*Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, 814; *New Testament Word Studies*, 2.501). He observes that the order of Mendicants *burdens* the state and others (v. 8). He may also be among the first to use the term “enthymeme” of a passage in Paul (v. 10), that is, “confirmation of the argument by its contrary” (some use the term differently). “He proves from the necessity of eating the necessity of labouring” (502). “Busybodies” stands in contrast to doing one’s own work. In his Latin original he notes the word play in v. 11: Greek, *mēden ergazomenous alla periergazomenous*, not doing any work, but being busybodies.

**Oliver Goldsmith** (1730–74) was an Anglo-Irish writer, poet, and physician, known especially for *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). He lamented the depopulation of the countryside, and the place of luxury in Britain. In the poem *The Deserted Village* (1770) he wrote:

Ill fares the land, to hast’ning ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay ...;  
But a bold peasantry, their country’s pride,  
When once destroy’d can never be supplied.

A time there was, ere England's griefs began,  
 When every rood of ground maintain'd its man;  
 For him light labour spread for wholesome store,  
 Just gave what life requir'd, but gave no more,  
 His best companions, innocence and health;  
 And his best riches, ignorance of wealth.

(1.51)

Goldsmith advocated neither riches nor poverty, but labor sufficient for one's needs, especially the manual labor.

## The Nineteenth Century

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) declares that Paul now addresses an issue which brought “moral injury ... on the church” (*Commentary*, 481). Like Bengel, he perceives that this refusal to work arises “on account of the supposed proximity of the Kingdom of God.” It constituted “fanatical idleness.” But many stand firm, and Paul is concerned that they should not be contaminated. They are “to await quietly the time and hour of the advent, without neglecting one's earthly calling” (482). Paul reminds them of his example, making no use of the privilege of recurring support (vv. 7–10). *Ataktos* comes to mean “giving up regular earthly calling” (483). The “disorderly” in “their fanatical excitement ... sought ... more and more to inflame themselves by a busy but unprofitable activity” (483).

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) notes that the harshness of the word “command” becomes softened by “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Lectures Chiefly Expository*, 323). The metaphor of “breaking rank” is not entirely lost, and may be especially suitable to a maritime and commercial community such as Thessalonica (324). The “disorderly” retard the progress of the whole church. Verse 7 embodies “a regretful reproof” that Paul needs to repeat himself (325). Hutchison notes the play on words “busy” and “busybody” in v. 10. He then comments, “In their excited restlessness they were failing to recognize the truth that in this world of sin, work is a blessing, because it is a safeguard ... Believers have daily work to do” (327–8). Time “must be redeemed, not wasted” (328).

**Jerome K. Jerome** (1859–1927), humorist and writer, wrote *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), and also in 1889 offered an ironic parody of work in his *The Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*. He wrote, “I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours. I love to keep it by me; the idea of getting rid of it nearly breaks my heart” (ch. 15).

**W. Bornemann** (d. 1858) explains that Paul has to speak “with the authority of Christ” (*Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, 392). He had provided a model (*Vorbild*) of conduct. Yet he combines a “command” to the “disorderly” with an “appeal”

to the church in general. He addresses even the “disorderly” as “dear brothers” (393). For the community to be “free and easy, to have brotherly association, is out of the question, especially if table-fellowship is in view, perhaps also the admitting of the whole community” (394). We can imagine “the idle” seeking to share informally with the common meals of the whole fellowship. Nevertheless a contrary tradition had been “handed on” (295). Not to eat without paying one’s way is “already given as a rule” (296).

## Final Exhortations, Greetings, and Benediction (2 Thess. 3:14–18)

### Introduction and Overview

Comments on reception of interpretation remain less plentiful than in other sections, and we conclude with an untypically short section. In terms of *rhetoric* 3:14–15 constitute a peroration, which recapitulates and amplifies a previous point, and appeals to emotions. In *epistolary* terms, it constitutes a closure of the letter. The church must be confirmed in its “withdrawal” from the “disorderly,” but not treat them as enemies. Paul makes an appeal to “shun and to shame,” but to do so within limits (Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 254). Verse 16 contains a prayer for peace, both for deliverance from persecution and for peace within the church. Behind the Greek, “peace,” lies the Hebrew *shalōm*, which usually includes well-being. Verse 17 refers to Paul’s autograph, as in 1 Cor. 16:21, Col. 4:18, and Philem. 19. He would have taken the pen from his secretary. Finally, he prays for the grace of Christ to be with the addressees.

### The Subapostolic and Patristic Periods

**Polycarp** (c. 69–c. 155), bishop of Smyrna, cites 2 Thess. 3:15, writing, “Keep yourselves from all evil” (11.2), but regards the lapsed (Valens and his wife) “not as enemies” (*Philippians* 11.4; in Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 1.296–7). **The Shepherd of Hermas** (2nd century) reflects these verses. Speaking of an adulterer, the author writes: “Withdraw from him, and cease to live with him” (2.4.1; ANF 2.22).

**Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) notes that Paul writes, “Associate not with him, that he may feel awed; not regarding [him] as an enemy, but rebuking him as a brother” (*On Modesty* 13; ANF 4.87). He declares that Paul was not indulgent, and would not have given *carte blanche* to such a sin as fornication in the church.

**Cyprian** (d. 258) continues the theme about “departing from” those who are lapsed. All sin, he says, should be renounced in baptism. Hence Christians must “depart from ... all who walk disorderly” (*Treatise* 12.2.68; ANF 5.551).

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) notes that Paul urges the church to act “without anger or insult” (*Ad Thessalonicienses*, 2.248). When Paul wishes for peace for the church “at all times and in every way” (v. 16), this becomes “always in every place” (*semper in omni loco*).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) calls the command to withdraw from the disorderly “no slight chastisement ... that he may be ashamed,” only with the proviso “do not count him as an enemy,” lest he despair (vv. 14–15; *Homily 5* on 2 Thessalonians; NPNF1 13.395). The “heavy punishment” is to deprive the disorderly of conversation and expose their disgrace (see the incestuous man in 1 Cor. 5:1–5). The sinner expected “pity from you, but he goes away having received a deadly blow, and weeps the more” (*Hom.* 5; NPNF1 13.395). Paul finally prays for peace “in every way,” anticipating Rom. 12:18, “Live peaceably with *all*.” This prayer is more than a symbol of friendship, but hardly less. Chrysostom also addresses 2 Thess. 3:14 while speaking of love in his *Homily 33 on First Corinthians*, on 1 Cor. 13:5–7 (NPNF1 12.199). To exclude the disobedient person from the common fellowship or from the table is really an act of love, for it can be done gently for his good, counting him “not as an enemy.”

**Augustine** (354–430) refers to 2 Thess. 3:14, 15 during his sermon on Matt. 10:16, “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves.” Ministers are to be “simple as doves, and wise as serpents.” Doves feed together, and delight in communion. But, Paul says, “If anyone obey not our own word in this epistle, mark that person, and have no company with him” (2 Thess. 3:14–15). Hence we need both the simplicity of doves and the wisdom of serpents, to avoid evil (*Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament* 14.3; NPNF1 6.306). Christians must remain loving, and be willing to receive the sinner in due course. All the same, excommunication, as in 1 Cor. 5:5, can drive out wickedness (*Faith and Works* 2–3; FC 27.224–5).

## The Medieval Period

**Bede the Venerable** (c. 673–735) includes the excerpt from Augustine on 2 Thess. 3:14. The text reads, “We, brothers and sisters, keep aloof from our brothers and sisters as a rebuke, and do not associate with them. We associate with pagans rather than those close to us if we see that they are living wickedly, in order that they may be discomfited and freed from their faults” (*Excerpts from the Works of St. Augustine*, 293). This is often for the sake of

healing. Bede does not note the original context concerning why the “disorderly” decided not to work, but ascribes their attitude to pride and arrogance.

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) notes that Paul warns the readers against those who take advantage of their human kindness, and neglect to observe what he and his co-workers have said. They should respond similarly, and punish those who misuse their leisure, by indulging in curiosity about other people’s affairs. Indeed this is requested on behalf of the Lord. They are “to note this letter (*notate*) and not communicate with him, that he may be put to shame (*ut confundatur*)” (*Opera Omnia* 3, PL 112.579). They must guard the apostle’s command. He wishes the God of peace to give the church “peace always in all ways,” and prays specifically that they may experience “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He has signed the letter with his own hand, to avoid doubt about its authority (579).

**Thietland of Einsiedeln** (d. 965) notes that Paul warns his readers “a third time.” The first time was when he was present with them; the second was through the First Epistle; the third comes through the Second Epistle. “Obedience” is the issue. By “take note,” Paul means, “Make him conscious [or aware] ... You should have no fellowship or familiarity with him ... This apostolic exhortation is appropriate not only for them but also for us and for all Christians that they who desire to obey evangelical or apostolic teachings be separated from those who are hostile to them” (2 *Thessalonians* 71). The lapsed must be shamed and corrected. They may be restored, once they have been humbled. Verse 15, “do not reckon him as an enemy,” is not inconsistent with this, for Paul “calls him a brother in faith only, not in devotion” (72). The prayer for peace (v. 16) reminds us of John 14:27: “My peace I leave with you.” Paul prays also for “many good things for them.” In vv. 17–18, “A mark (*signum*) marks something that is one’s own,” which Paul uses, since “there were heretics who ... sent epistles” (73). He prays finally for the grace of Christ.

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) does not seem to refer to 2 Thess. 3:14–18. But his thoughts on apostasy are relevant. He asserts, “The beginning of the pride of man is apostasy” (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 12, art. 1.1). In the context of the church, we should “refrain from other people’s affairs ... and attend to amendment of life” (*Summa Theologiae* qu. 187, art. 2). “The religious state is directed to the attainment of perfection of charity” (art. 2). He continues, “Pride is most efficaciously healed by those things which savour most of abasement” (qu. 187, art. 5; reply to obj. 5). Perhaps this comment is nearest to 2 Thess. 3:14–15. On the blessing (vv. 16–18) Aquinas speaks of “Man’s Last End,” which consists of “well-being,” not in terms of material wealth, fame, power, or pleasure, but in an “infinite good” purposed by God (*Summa Theologiae* 2.1, qu. 2, arts. 1, 2, 8).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Menno Simons** (1496–1561) gives his name to the Mennonites. He renounced the Roman Church in 1536, and joined the Anabaptists. He promoted the rights and responsibilities of the local congregation. Although he urged non-resistance, he is uncompromising about the severe impact of 2 Thess. 3:6, 14: “We command you to withdraw from every brother that walks disorderly ... If any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.” This must be acknowledged (“On the Ban: Questions and Answers,” in Williams (ed.), *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, qu. 2, 264).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) declares, “People who had disobeyed what Paul said were not just rebelling against man but against God himself” (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 108). Hence Paul insists that “such people should be severely disciplined.” They are to be brought low by shame. Calvin interprets Paul’s words, “Do not associate with him” as implying excommunication (108). Paul “excluded them from the fellowship of believers. It is like a disease, which can be stopped from infecting other people. We may compare it with 1 Tim. 5:20. The offender becomes “displeased with himself” (109). Calvin adds: “Shame, like sorrow, is a useful preparation for hating sin” (109). Nevertheless in v. 15 Paul adds “a softening touch” to his admonition. The offender must not be overwhelmed by sadness (see 2 Cor. 2:5–7). The aim of discipline is beneficial, so we avoid giving too deep a wound: “gentleness and kindness are necessary” (109). Paul alludes to all but “the totally incurable.” The prayer of v. 16 is connected with this, for the church should seek peaceful solutions. Finally, in v. 17, Paul “was guarding against forged letters ... This was an old trick of Satan – to send out specious letters” (110). In v. 18 “The concluding prayer explains how God helps his believing people – by the presence of Christ’s grace” (110).

Calvin’s references to 2 Thess. 3:14, 15 in the *Institutes* belong to his consideration of the jurisdiction and discipline of the church (*Institutes* 4.10–12). He compares 1 Cor. 5:5–6 and 2 Thess. 3:14: “that he may be ashamed” (*Institutes* 4.12.5; tr. Beveridge, 2.456). He speaks of “the censure of the Church,” but this need not consign the offender to “perpetual damnation.” Hence, “You must not count him as an enemy”; otherwise “our discipline shall degenerate into destruction” (*Institutes* 4.12.10; tr. Beveridge, 2.459). This is a good illustration of *reception history*: the text receives a valid exegesis, but Calvin shows how it coheres with his doctrine of the visible church.

**George Herbert** (1593–1633) composed a poem on obedience. He writes two verses as follows:

O let thy sacred will  
All thy delight in me fulfil!  
Let me not think an action mine own way,  
But as thy love shall sway,  
Resigning up the rudder to thy skill.

Lord, what is man to thee,  
That thou shouldst mind a rotten tree?  
Yet since thou canst not choose but see my actions;  
So great are thy perfections,  
Thou mayst as well my actions guide, as see.  
(“Obedience,” *Poems*, 95)

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79), writing c. 1685, understands v. 14 to be addressed “in case of obstinacy” (*Commentary*, 3.770). “Noting” may involve exclusion from the church, or temporary suspension of the Lord’s Supper. There may be degrees of church discipline. But the offender is not to be viewed “as a heathen” (771). The action is “for his good.” The admonition must be fraternal (v. 15). Paul then proceeds with the “closure” of the epistle (vv. 16–18). “By all means” shows “the desirableness and difficulty of the peace . . . contrary to the temper of some men” (771). Paul prays for the avoidance of schism. In v. 17 he gives proof that this epistle is genuine (see Gal. 6:11; Philem. 19). He then closes with the grace in v. 18 (772).

**August H. Francke** (1663–1727) writes: “If you must rebuke others for their sins, do not put off the unpleasant moments because of fear or shyness. Fear or shyness must be conquered . . . But before you chastise another, chastise yourself so that your report will arise out of empathy. Rebuke with love and great foresight and modesty . . . Christ rebuked Peter with a glance when Peter denied him . . . Love must be your teacher” (*Rules for the Protection of Conscience and Good Order* 21, in Erb, (ed.), *Pietists*, 111). Paul has urged, “Take note of those who do not obey . . . have nothing to do with them” (v. 14); but he continues, “Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers” (v. 15).

## The Eighteenth Century

**Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) comments on Paul’s prayer for “peace with God.” He observes, “We need nothing more to make us safe and happy, nor can we desire anything better for ourselves and our friends than to have God’s gracious presence with us and them.”

**Johann Albrecht Bengel** (1687–1752) believes that v. 14 means “using this epistle to admonish him” (the disorderly; *Gnomon*, 815; *Word Studies*, 2.502).

The offender becomes an example to avoid. However, v. 15 warns us not to fall into extremes. We must explain the reason for our action to the disorderly people. Peace “by all means” (v. 16) means “in every mode of living” (502). The “sign” (v. 17) implies Paul’s use of another person or secretary to write the rest of the epistle (503).

**William Cowper** (1731–1800) explores the theme of obedience in the *Olney Hymns* (1779). He writes:

O Lord, my best desire fulfil,  
 And help me to resign  
 Life, health, and comfort to thy will,  
 And make thy pleasure mine.  
 Why should I shrink at thy command,  
 Whose love forbids my fears,  
 Or tremble at the gracious hand,  
 That wipes away my tears?  
 No, let me rather freely yield  
 What most I prize to thee;  
 Who never hast a good with-held,  
 Thou wilt withhold from me.

(Cowper, in Newton, *Works*, 613, Hymn 29)

## The Nineteenth Century

**Charles Ellicott** (1816–1905) is aware that “in every epistle” may seem anachronistic when Paul has not yet written them, but assumes that he intended “autograph attestation” as a generally adopted policy (*Commentary*, 135).

**Gottlieb Lünemann** (1819–94) insists (after reviewing numerous earlier commentators, including Chrysostom, Luther, Calvin, Grotius, de Wette, and others) that v. 14 must mean: “But if anyone acts contrary to my prohibition repeated in this Epistle, note that man, i.e. mark him” (*Thessalonians*, 252). Yet he remains a brother (v. 15). In v. 16 Christ is the creator of peace. But “peace” does not mean mutual harmony, for there is no hint of splits in the church. But “fanatical excitement ... and the idleness consequent upon it, *might* lead to ... disquiet” (253). Peace may well mean “calmness of mind.” On vv. 17–18 Lünemann urges, “Paul had *not* written the letter with his own hand, but *dictated* it” (his emphasis; see Rom. 16:22; 1 Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18; Philem. 19).

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) points out that Jeremy Taylor finds an argument for episcopacy in Paul’s command to note the offender (Taylor, *Episcopacy Asserted*, Lecture 21; Hutchison, Lecture 27, *Lectures Chiefly Expository*, 330). But Hutchison rejects his argument on grounds of context and meaning. The

“mark” is not a stigma, but a mental marking. Disorder and disobedience are “marks of a spiritual disease” (331). Hence withdrawal is necessary for the safety of the church as a whole. Yet he is still one of themselves (v. 15). Reproof aims at peace, not at discord. On v. 16 Hutchison observes, “There is not true peace without His presence ... The apostolic benediction rests on the Saviour’s parting assurance, ‘Lo, I am with you always’” (332).

**James Denney** (1856–1917) compares with the benediction the words of Jesus in John, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (*Thessalonians*, 392). This is to be understood “comprehensively.” We recall the readers’ situation: “The troubles and vexations of life become too trying for us; and instead of peace within, we are full of care and fear ... He [Paul] remembered the persecutions they had already undergone ... Similar troubles ... awaited them” (393). Paul prays for them to possess “a heart at leisure from itself, to soothe and sympathize” (394). This is peace. Denney is emphatic about the genuineness of all the epistles claimed as Pauline, although many disagree (394–9). On the last verse, he notes, “Grace is pre-eminently a Pauline word ... It is the beginning and end of his gospel” (399). God’s grace will keep the readers from falling in their pagan environment, in spite of “much affliction” (402).

# Brief Biographies

**Joseph Addison** (1672–1719), essayist, poet, and statesman, was an Oxford classical scholar and a friend of Swift.

**Henry Alford** (1810–71) became dean of Canterbury in 1857, and was also a talented artist, musician, and hymn-writer. He employed careful textual criticism in his classic work *The Greek Testament* (4 vols.; 1841–61).

**Ambrose** (c. 338–97), who became bishop of Milan by public acclaim, was noted for his preaching and orthodoxy. He

influenced the conversion of Augustine, and maintained the independence of the church against civil power.

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) is the author of commentaries in Latin on 13 epistles of St. Paul, including 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

**Anselm of Canterbury** (c. 1033–1109) wrote *The Proslogion* on the ontological argument for the existence of God, and *Why God Became Man*, which brought together Christology and the atonement

(see *Patrologia Latina*, vols. 158–159; Fairweather (ed.), *A Scholastic Miscellany*, pp. 69–210.)

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) had enormous influence on medieval and Catholic theology. Born near Aquino in Italy, he later lectured at the universities of Paris and Cologne. We move from the era of monks to lecturers in universities. From 1265 he worked on his great systematic theology, *Summa Theologiae*. He also wrote commentaries, including one on 1 Thessalonians, which has been translated into English as *Commentary on Saint Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians and the Letter to the Philippians*.

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) was a Reformation thinker who opposed Calvin's doctrine of predestination. He did not produce commentaries explicitly on the epistles. His biblical allusions are so frequent that he merits note.

**Athanasius** (c. 296–373) attacked Arianism, and defended the Council of Nicaea (325).

**Augustine of Hippo** (354–430) was influenced by Ambrose and others. He is widely known for his *Confessions* and his *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, as well as for *The City of God*. He wrote commentaries and homilies on the Psalms, the four Gospels, and other biblical books, but we possess only his expository reflections on 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 in his *City of God*, 20.19, and a fragment on 1 Thess. 4:13–16 in 20.20 (see *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 2, pp. 437–9; for his letters, see *Letters*, tr. Sister Wilfrid Parsons).

**Basil the Great** (c. 330–79), friend of Gregory Nazianzus, defended the orthodox faith, especially the doctrine of the Trinity.

**Ferdinand C. Baur** (1792–1860) was a radical New Testament critic. He restricted authentic Pauline epistles to the four major epistles.

**Richard Baxter** (1615–91) was a Puritan theologian, ordained an Anglican in 1639, who in 1640 rejected belief in episcopacy in its current English form. He advocated moderation, and produced *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1650), and a *Paraphrase of the New Testament* (1685).

**Bede the Venerable** (c. 673–735) was a biblical exegete, as well as historian, who settled in Jarrow in 682. The title "Venerable" is more likely to refer to his bones in Durham Cathedral than to him. His work, *Excerpts from the Works of St. Augustine on the Letters of the Blessed Apostle Paul*, has been translated by David Hurst.

**Johann Albrecht Bengel** (1687–1752) wrote a commentary which achieved the status of a classic, his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (1742). This work influenced John Wesley, and is available in an edited English translation, *New Testament Word Studies* (2 vols.).

**Wilhelm Bornemann** (d. 1858) wrote *Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, which was published in 1894 and is full of rigor and detail. It includes an extensive account of the history of interpretation of 2 Thess. 2:1–12 (pp. 400–59).

**Nicholas Brady** (1659–1726), theologian, poet, and hymn-writer (often with Nahum Tate), was educated at Oxford and Dublin, and was chaplain to William III, Mary, and Anne.

**Heinrich Bullinger** (1504–75) was a Swiss reformer. He compared Catholic doctrine with that of Luther, and was especially influenced by Melancthon. He followed Luther and Zwingli, succeeding Zwingli as chief pastor in Zurich.

**John Calvin** (1509–64) studied in Paris and Orleáns. He was persuaded to remain in Geneva to organize the Reformation. Calvin set himself to write commentaries on every biblical book, as well as *The Institutes*. Many regard him as the first “modern” exegete, because he attended to historical meaning and the author’s intention with enormous insight. The most recent English edition of his commentary on *Thessalonians* is edited by Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer.

**Geoffrey Chaucer** (c. 1340–1400), poet, philosopher, and diplomat, is best known for his unfinished *Canterbury Tales*.

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) of Constantinople studied under Diodore, leader of the Antiochene tradition of interpretation. He was recognized by his contemporaries as an outstanding preacher and orator (hence the name *Chruso-stoma*, golden mouth). His homilies on many biblical books include 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) wrote the *Paedagogos*, on the Christian life, and the *Stromata* (*Miscellanies*). He provides us with a good knowledge of Valentinian Gnosticism, and sought, in effect, a middle way between Gnosticism and Christian orthodoxy.

**Clement of Rome** (fl. 96) was the author of perhaps the earliest subapostolic epistle, 1 Clement. Many claim that he was second or third in succession to Peter as bishop of Rome, but others doubt this succession.

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge** (1772–1834), poet, stressed imagination and faith in opposition to the rationalism of much eighteenth-century thought.

**William Cowper** (1731–1800), poet and hymn-writer, was a friend of John

Newton, with whom he collaborated in writing the *Olney Hymns*. He suffered from severe depression, and wrote the hymn which contains the line “Where is the blessedness I knew?” Mary Unwin, his sister-in-law, encouraged his secular poetry, including “John Gilpin was a citizen of credit and renown.”

**Samuel Crossman** (1624–84), poet and theologian, was first ejected in 1662, but later became dean of Bristol.

**Cyril of Alexandria** (d. 444) opposed Nestorius, but was overfond of conflict. Yet he was an able theologian, drawing on Athanasius and the Cappadocians.

**Dante Alighieri** (1265–1321) advocated the fourfold interpretation of scripture. He is best known for *The Divine Comedy*. “Comedy,” for him, meant “rural.”

**James Denney** (1856–1917) was a Scottish theologian, best known for his work *The Death of Christ* (1902), in which he defended a view of penal substitution. His work on 1 and 2 Thessalonians appeared in The Expositor’s Bible series in 1892.

**John Eadie** (1810–76) was a leading Presbyterian preacher in Glasgow, who became professor of the United Presbyterian College, and published commentaries on the Greek text of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.

**Jonathan Edwards** (1703–58) participated in the “Great Awakening” in America. He combined Calvinism and philosophy with a critical assessment of the “awakening.”

**Charles J. Ellicott** (1816–1905), professor of divinity at King’s College London, and then at Cambridge, became bishop of Gloucester. His commentary on the New Testament, including *Commentary on the Epistles* (1858) gained a wide influence.

**Desiderius Erasmus** (c. 1467–1536), a master of satire, wit, and learning, represents urbane, classical scholarship. He remained a devout churchman, and a cautious reformer of the church. His major work includes his *Greek New Testament*.

**Estius** (Willem Hessels van Est) (1542–1613) was provost and chancellor of Douay, one of the foremost Catholic universities of Europe. His principal work was *Commentarii in Omnes Divi Pauli et Catholicas Epistolas* (1614–16), of which *Thessalonians* can be found in vol. 2, pp. 548–631. There are few traces of anti-Protestant polemic.

**John Gill** (1697–1771), biblical scholar, served as a Strict Baptist minister. He was a Calvinist who served as pastor in Southwark for 51 years. He wrote *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (1731) and *An Exposition of the New Testament* (1748).

**Gregory the Great** of Rome (c. 540–604) is widely regarded as the first of the medieval theologians. He founded monasteries, administered finances, and wrote as a pastor. He practiced the four-fold model of biblical interpretation.

**Gregory of Nazianzus** (c. 329–389/90), one of the Cappadocian Fathers, defended the Nicene Christology, and the Council of Constantinople (381).

**Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 330–95), Basil's brother, passionately defended the theology of the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople.

**Hugo Grotius** (Hugo de Groot) (1583–1645) studied at Leiden. His *Annotationes* on the New Testament appeared in 1641. Although he was a Protestant, he sympathized with Catholic ideas.

**Haimo of Auxerre** (c. 810–c. 875) wrote on Romans and other epistles; his commentary on 2 Thess. 2:1–12 is translated

in *Second Thessalonians: Two Early Mediaeval Apocalyptic Commentaries* (2001); see *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 117, cols. 765–84. He was for many years confused with other figures who had a similar name.

**Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) was a Presbyterian minister in Chester, England. His *Expositions of the Old and New Testaments* in six volumes (1708–10) became a classic of devotion in many churches. Unable to complete the epistles, he included 1 and 2 Thessalonians in his *Concise Commentary*.

**George Herbert** (1593–1633) was ordained in the Church of England, and wrote numerous poems. His works included *A Priest to the Temple; or, The Country Parson*. He wrote the hymns “King of glory, King of peace” and “Teach me, my God and King.”

**Hippolytus** (c. 170–c. 236) is often regarded as the most important third-century theologian of the Roman Church. He was elected as rival bishop of Rome to Callistus.

**Richard Hooker** (c. 1554–1600) was an Anglican theologian and apologist of the Elizabethan settlement of 1559, whose treatise *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* became a classic of Anglican theology.

**John Huss** (or Hus) (1371–1415) continued Wycliffe's views, and founded the Czech Reformation movement.

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) published *Lectures Chiefly Expository on St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (1884). He was a noted Scottish preacher.

**Irenaeus** (c. 130–c. 200), bishop of Lyons, is often called the first great theologian of the church. He attacked Gnosticism, and stressed verifiable public apostolic tradition.

**Jerome** (c. 345–420) was an outstanding biblical scholar. He knew Hebrew, and worked with a canon of the Old Testament which excluded the Apocrypha. He produced the Vulgate. We do not have a commentary on Thessalonians by him.

**Benjamin Jowett** (1817–93), master of Balliol, Oxford, represented an Anglo-Catholic and Broad Church tradition. He contributed the essay on biblical interpretation to *Essays and Reviews* in which he declared that the Bible should be interpreted “like any other book.” His commentary on Thessalonians appeared in 1859.

**Julian of Norwich** (1343–1416) was a contemplative spiritual writer. She spoke of receiving a revelation of 15 “showings,” mainly concerning the love of God.

**John Keats** (1795–1821) was a friend of Shelley, and one of the foremost English Romantic poets.

**Margery Kempe** (c. 1373–c. 1438), mystic, mother, and traveler, fervently denounced all forms of pleasure. She claimed to receive several visions.

**Lafranc of Canterbury** (c. 1010–89) commented on all of Paul’s letters. His work on 1 and 2 Thessalonians can be found in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 150, cols. 331–46. He depends on the Fathers, and much of his work found its way into the *Glossa Ordinaria*.

**William Laud** (1573–1645), archbishop of Canterbury, was a supporter of Charles I and an opponent of Puritanism.

**William Law** (1686–1761) was an Anglican theologian, most celebrated for his work *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728). His work influenced John and Charles Wesley.

**Jean Leclerc** (Johannis Clericus) (1657–1736) was a Swiss theologian and a critical biblical exegete. His critical

interests led him to part with Calvinism.

**Joseph Barber Lightfoot** (1828–89) was bishop of Durham, seen by many as one of the “Cambridge triumvirate,” with B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort. They defended Christian orthodoxy and combined New Testament exegesis with theology. His *Notes* (1895) were preparatory studies for future commentaries.

**Gottlieb Lünemann** (1819–94) served as professor of theology at Göttingen, and his commentary on Thessalonians was published in the series edited by Heinrich A. W. Meyer (1850; 3rd edn. 1867).

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) was the founder major of the Reformation in Germany and northern Europe. He was professor of biblical studies at Wittenberg, and discovered a new understanding of “the righteousness of God” in Rom. 1:17, and in Paul. He was condemned by the pope in 1520. He was a great influence on Melancthon, Calvin, and Tyndale, among others.

**Philipp Melancthon** (1497–1560), German reformer and friend of Luther, led the Reformation movement while Luther was a prisoner in Wartburg. His well-known *Loci Communes* was based on his lectures on Romans. He sought unity among Protestants, especially between the Calvinists and Zwinglians.

**John Milton** (1608–74) wrote the epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667). He served the government under Oliver Cromwell and expressed despair at the failure of the Revolution. He also wrote *Paradise Regained* and “Let us with a gladsome mind.”

**John Newton** (1725–1807) wrote many outstanding hymns, together with William Cowper, some of which are based on biblical passages. Many of

these are published in *Olney Hymns* (1838).

**Nicholas of Lyre** (c. 1270–1349) began with the literal meaning of the text, and produced verse-by-verse commentaries which took account of the Hebrew text. He marks the turning point from medieval exegesis to the pre-Reformation era.

**Oecumenius of Tricca** (6th century): Fragments of his commentary on the Pauline epistles are often dated 560–640. His commentary on Thessalonians can be found in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 119, cols. 57–133.

**Friedrich Christoph Oetinger** (1702–82) was influenced by Jakob Böhme and Count Zinzendorf. He studied philosophy, Greek, and Hebrew, and became a well-known exponent of Pietism.

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) wrote a commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians which was published posthumously in 1840 and translated into English in 1856. He was influenced by Schleiermacher and Luther.

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) wrote extensive commentaries on most of the Bible, but most of the originals have been lost, largely because his teaching was later condemned. According to Jerome, he wrote a commentary on 1 Thessalonians, only fragments of which survive.

**Thomas Williamson Peile** (1806–82), a Church of England clergyman and headmaster, published his *Annotations on the Apostolic Epistles*, vol. 3: *Thessalonians–Hebrews* in 1851, drawing on Greek and Latin texts.

**Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430) wrote commentaries on the Pauline epistles, including 1 and 2 Thessalonians. These express a “Pelagian” doctrine of grace less prominently than might be expected, except on occasion. His Latin commentaries

can be found in *Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul, Latin* (1926).

**Peter Lombard** (c. 1100–61) produced biblical scholarship influenced by Hugh of St. Victor, the *Glossa Ordinaria*, and other sources. He produced commentaries on the Pauline epistles and theological works; see *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 191, cols. 1297–696; vol. 192, cols. 5–520.

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79), an Anglican rector until the Act of Uniformity in 1662, produced the *Synopsis criticorum biblicorum* (1669–76) and *English Annotations on the Holy Bible* (2 vols., 1683).

**Rabanus Maurus of Mainz** (c. 780–856), poet and preacher, studied under Alcuin of York. He played an active part in Carolingian politics. His Latin commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians appears in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 112, cols. 541–80.

**Friedrich Schleiermacher** (1768–1834), often called the first “modern” theologian, owed much to the Enlightenment and Kant, but also to Moravian piety. In addition to publishing a systematic theology, *The Christian Faith*, he also wrote on hermeneutics.

**William Shakespeare** (1564–1616), the playwright, wrote on almost every aspect of human life in. He wrote 38 plays.

**Nahum Tate** (1652–1715), Irish Protestant and hymn-writer, became Poet Laureate in 1692. His hymns include (with Nicholas Brady) “Through all the changing scenes of life” (Ps. 34), and “As pants the hart” (Ps. 42).

**Jeremy Taylor** (1613–67), bishop and chaplain to the Royalist Army, strongly opposed “popery.” His devotional writings, especially *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, are valued by Christians of all persuasions.

**Alfred, Lord Tennyson** (1809–92) published *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, at the age

of 19, and then collections of poetry throughout his life. He became Poet Laureate on the death of Wordsworth in 1850.

**Tertullian of Carthage** (c. 160–c. 225) wrote numerous theological and apologetic works in Latin, including attacks on Marcion and Gnosticism. He became a Montanist in later years.

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) is the third great Antiochene biblical exegete. He was largely orthodox, but became associated with Nestorianism. His commentaries on 1 and 2 Thessalonians are available in *In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, ed. H. B. Swete, vol. 2, pp. 1–66.

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) became bishop of Cyrus (or Cyrrhus) in Syria. He defended Antiochene Christology against Cyril of Alexandria. He befriended Nestorius, insisting that the title “Theotokos” must be understood figuratively. His work on 1 and 2 Thessalonians has been translated into English by Robert Charles Hill in *Commentary on the Letters of St. Paul*, vol. 2, pp. 107–35 (a fine translation which I have used throughout this book); see also *Patrologia Graeca*, vols. 80–84.

**Theophylact of Achridia** (n.d.) was writing c. 1075–80. He depended on John Chrysostom. His Latin commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians can be found in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 126, cols. 1279–357.

**Thietland of Einsiedeln** (d. 965) arrived at the monastery of Einsiedeln, Swabia in about 958. He wrote commentaries on several epistles, including 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The English translation of 2 Thessalonians is available in the same volume as that of Haimo of Auxerre, *Second Thessalonians: Two Early Mediaeval Apocalyptical Commentaries*.

Expectation of the end time was particularly rife in 950, and Thietland helped to damp down the fervor of popular preachers.

**Tyconius** (d. c. 400) expressed sympathy for the Catholic Church although he was a Donatist theologian. He wrote a “Book of Rules” on the interpretation of scripture, and prepared the way for Augustine’s largely nonapocalyptic interpretation of 2 Thess. 2:1–12.

**Thomas Vincent** (1634–78), a Puritan writer, was an Anglican rector who was ejected at the Act of Conformity in 1662, but he was much more polemical than Poole. He seems to have written no commentary, but his *Fire and Brimstone in Hell* bears strongly on 2 Thess. 2:1–12.

**Isaac Watts** (1674–1748) is chiefly a hymn-writer. Among his more well-known hymns are “There is a land of pure delight” and “When I survey the wondrous cross.”

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88) was a prodigious hymn-writer. His hymn “And can it be that I should gain / An interest in the Savior’s blood?” expresses his and his brother John’s theology of atonement.

**John Wesley** (1703–91), together with his brother Charles, owed much to Zinzendorf and Moravian piety, as well as to Luther. He left extensive works, including his brief *Notes on the Whole Bible* (1754).

**William Wordsworth** (1770–1850) composed many lyrical poems, and was Poet Laureate. He is recognized as one of the foremost Romantic poets.

**John Wycliffe** (c. 1333–84), master of Balliol College, Oxford, strongly defended the authority of the Bible, and preaching. He also attacked skepticism, the papacy, and transubstantiation.

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