Bible Faculty Summit
Maranatha Baptist University, July 29–July 31, 2024, Watertown, WI

Urgency in the Mundane: Present Living in Light of the Parousia Texts in 1 and 2 Thessalonians

Cory M. Marsh, Ph.D.
Professor of New Testament, Southern California Seminary
Scholar in Residence, Revolve Bible Church
Cory.marsh@socalsem.edu

Introduction

No one questions that first century Mediterranean church culture is different than modern Western culture. Differences aside, there are more similarities between the two than often assumed. One commonality is the mundane routines of average daily life involving individual behavior, societal relationships, business and vocation—along with the ethics involved within each sphere. Two Pauline letters speak directly into these areas and offer an unexpected cosmic incentive for how believers are to conduct themselves in normal, everyday life. Among the earliest canonical writings, 1 and 2 Thessalonians evidence a strategy uncommon in the New Testament by appealing to the coming of Christ as a motivator for spiritual renewal and vitality in otherwise ordinary living.

This paper argues that a major theme of 1 and 2 Thessalonians is one of eschatological hope for believers to form spiritually, both individually and communally, during the present age before the *parousia*. Additionally, it will suggest that the prominence of end-times teaching in these two letters to a brand new "baby church" demonstrates that eschatology is a fundamental biblical doctrine that should be taught to Christians with urgency, not reserved as a final doctrine as customary in systematic theology. Speaking words of both exhortation and encouragement to the Thessalonians in light of Christ's imminent *parousia*, Paul teaches a perennial lesson for Christians everywhere: hope in the future produces holiness in the present.

End-Times and the Limits of Systematic Theology

Systematic theologies traditionally cover ten topics of Christian doctrine in a logical order. Almost without exception, the last one is eschatology, which makes logical sense as it is a study on "last things" or "end times." This customary structure in textbooks can leave a skewed impression regarding the *importance* attached to each doctrine, however unintended. Placing eschatology as the last of all other Christian doctrines can inadvertently give the perception that eschatology is unrelated to personal sanctification or the Christian life. It becomes something merely to tack on at the end of one's systematic beliefs.

The biblical witness offers a different order. According to Oren Martin, "Eschatology—the study of last things—enters not at the end of theology but at the beginning…. Hence the entire Bible is eschatological since it focuses upon and culminates in the arrival of the King, the Lord Jesus Christ, who

ushers in the Kingdom of God and fulfills what God intended for humanity and the world."[1] This foundational eschatology, which Paul likewise expressed to the Thessalonians, has had a far-reaching influence in motivating followers of Christ in their daily lives throughout church history.

The second century bishop Irenaeus understood Paul's *parousia* texts to the Thessalonians to be a promise restricted for those who are living a Spirit-filled life in the present, much like Enoch and Elijah who were whisked away into paradise. In his recent study on the eschatology of the church fathers, Michael Svigel explains that for Irenaeus, "The promise of being caught up in the likeness of Enoch and Elijah is limited to those who are 'perfect and spiritual,' while those who are imperfect and carnal will be left along with the unbelievers to endure the purifying trials of the tribulation."[2] Question over his partial-pre-tribulation rapture theory aside, the points is that Irenaeus (and others) during the Patristic period stressed the importance of ethical living in light of the *parousia*.[3] A later and striking example comes from the sixteenth century Swiss brethren Anabaptists. This group endured harsh persecution for their stances on believer's baptism, pacifism, and their eschatological outlook. They were entirely premillennial, looking forward to Christ's *parousia* to endure their present circumstances. William Estep recounts that, "Their eschatology saved them from utter despair in facing the indescribable suffering which they everywhere experienced from the authorities. Even as Christ suffered, they too, as His disciples were not to consider themselves immune from a similar fate. As Christ was vindicated in the resurrection, they believed that they too would eventually triumph with Him."[4]

Examples such as these demonstrate that the church, throughout its history, has looked to eschatology, not as a final doctrine to consider in systematic theology, but as a doctrine that provides the impetus and motivation for daily Christian life. As such, Christ's imminent *parousia* is not a doctrine as abstract or ambiguous as often presented. Quite the opposite, such eschatology should be taught with urgency in every local church.

Prominence of the Parousia

The *parousia* is a big deal for Paul. More than any other biblical writer, Paul applies the term *parousia* to Jesus's return seven times, six of which are in his letters to the church at Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 8; cf. 1 Cor 15:23). Moreover, apart from two instances in 2 Thessalonians, each reference concludes its accompanying pericope by infusing eschatological themes with daily sanctification. For example, the first reference to the word closes out the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians after commending these new believers for their endurance in persecution and imitation of Christian churches in Judea (v. 14). Paul then says, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming [παρουσία]? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy" (1 Thess 2:19–20).

---

[1] Oren Martin, "How Do the Old and New Testaments Progress, Integrate, and Climax in Christ?" in *40 Questions about Biblical Theology*, eds. Jason S. DeRouchie, Oren R. Martin, and Andrew David Naselli (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 53.

[2] Michael J. Svigel, *The Fathers on the Future: A 2nd Century Eschatology for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2024), 233.

[3] See Ibid., 241–274 for Svigel's critique of Irenaeus's partial-rapture theory as well as other stances on the church's assumption to heaven at the *parousia*, along with a thorough defense of Svigel's pretirb rapture position.

[4] William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 264.

In fact, apart from the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, each of that letter's chapters ends with a reference to Christ's return with the word *parousia*.[5] In chapter two, Paul says the Thessalonian saints would be his crown of rejoicing before the Lord Jesus Christ at His *parousia* (2:19). Chapter three ends by exhorting their hearts to be established blameless in holiness before the Father at the *parousia* of the Lord with all His saints (3:13). Chapter four ends by comforting the Thessalonians with the knowledge that if alive at Christ's *parousia* they would be caught up together with the departed saints to meet Him in the air and so forever be with the Lord (4:15). Finally, the epistle ends in chapter 5 with the petition for the saints that their whole body, soul, and spirit be preserved blameless unto the *parousia* of our Lord Jesus Christ (5:23). And though chapter one of 1 Thessalonians does not use the word *parousia*, the concept is there nevertheless ending with waiting for the return of God's Son from heaven to "deliver us from the wrath to come" (1:10), an event the rest of letter terms *parousia*.

In his dual-correspondence with the church at Thessalonica, Paul averages the term between two and three times every thousand words. Compared to his longer letters to Corinth or Rome, which average over six thousand words collectively, a word appearing here and there every thousand or so words may not seem that important. But Paul's letters to the Thessalonians are among the shortest writings of the New Testament (NT), the first letter containing just 1481 Greek words and the second clocking at a mere 823 words. Combined, the total is just 2304 words of Greek text in these two epistles, which makes every appearance of *parousia* worthy of pause. Coupled with the fact that 1 and 2 Thessalonians are arguably the earliest writings of Paul, if not of the entire New Testament[6], the concept of the "coming presence" or "imminent appearing" of Christ—transliterated as *parousia* (παρουσία)—is undoubtedly a prominent theme in these back-to-back letters.[7]

Ethical Eschatology

Each occurrence of the word *parousia* in 1 and 2 Thessalonians is in every sense eschatological. Their contextual usage is never divorced from the return of Jesus Christ, which Paul orients as a still-future event that the Thessalonian church was to expect without warning. Thus, a tone of urgency is detected in the two letters. However, the term's usage may have distinct eschatological moments in view while referencing Christ's return. For instance, Paul writes, "For this we declare to you by a word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming [παρουσία] of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep (1 Thess 4:15), an event not specifically preceded by signs, predicated only on their waiting for Christ's

---

[5] See Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Synopsis of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Grace Publications, n.d.), 76.

[6] The scholarly debate over which is Paul's first canonical letter is generally between Galatians and 1 and/or 2 Thessalonians, with the scales tipped slightly in favor of Galatians (cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, Christianity in the Making 2 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 497–518). A recent (and largely novel) approach is offered by Douglas A. Campbell, *Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 190–253, which attempts to sketch a *vitae* of Paul's ministry along with dates for his writings, not with the companion help of Acts, but solely by Paul's letters. This results in an earlier dating the previously proposed for Paul's travels to Macedonia, which included Thessalonica, in c. 40–42, during which the apostle would have written both 1 and 2 Thessalonians as possibly the first NT letters. A less contemporary argument defending the chronological priority of 2 Thessalonians is Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

[7] For the English glosses, see Walter Bauer, et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature* 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 780; Franco Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient* Greek, eds. Madeleine Goh and Chad Schroder (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1591; Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 647–656. From here on these works are abbreviated BDAG, MGS, and *NIDNTTE*, respectively.

revelation from heaven (cf. 1:10). Using the same word elsewhere he states, "the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming [παρουσία]" (2 Thess 2:8), implying this is a different event preceded by the revealing of Antichrist. Distinctions in the *parousia* aside, Paul connects the sudden appearing of Christ with a type of present-living expected of the Thessalonian Christians. This included "increasing in love for one another" (1 Thess 3:12), "abstaining from sexual immorality" (4:3), and "doing good to one another and to everyone" (5:15). Rather than living with an apathetic attitude passively waiting for the *parousia*, the Thessalonian believers were to avoid "idleness" (ἀτάκτως) at all costs (2 Thess 3:7, 11–12).[8] "If anyone is not willing to work," Paul charged, "let him not eat" (3:10). Void of any suggestions to hunker down or to isolate from the world or from one another in light of the sudden appearing of Christ, throughout both letters, Paul presupposes the *parousia* as the ultimate motivator for active Christian living.

For Paul, eschatology is not esoteric; it is ethical. The topics that emerge from both Thessalonian epistles include the intersections of identity, ethnicity, faith, and family obligations, along with various ethics concerning charity, sex, multi-ethnic communities, hospitality, and business and trade dealings.[9] These ideas suggest that the eschatology of 1 and 2 Thessalonians "may be about ethics and morality as much as, maybe even *more than*, about the future."[10] Rather than instructing the Thessalonians to set dates, sell all they had, form a commune, or even to fortify their community from outsiders, the apostle offers modest counsel to "live quite lives," minding their own affairs and maintaining an attractive witness before non-believers as productive members of society (1 Thess 4:11–12; 2 Thess 3:12–13). This means the eschatology so prominent in these two letters functions as a tutor, not so much for helping predict the future, but for reminding the believers at Thessalonica on how they should behave in their present space *because* of the future. Quite simply, Thessalonian eschatology is ethical. As Rafael Rodriguez puts it:

> For Paul, eschatology transforms his readers identity…and results in a new ethic. As for the Thessalonians' identity, they are 'children of light' and 'children of the day,' as opposed to their adversaries, who are, implicitly 'of the night,' and 'of the darkness' (1 Thess 5:5). As for their ethics, their behavior is alert and sober, as befits the day, rather than languid and inebriated (5:6–8).[11]

Considering the prominence of encouragement, ethics, and exhortation throughout 1 and 2 Thessalonians does force the interpreter to engage the scholarly dialogue of categorizing these two epistles. Are they pastoral or doctrinal? Is their purpose for encouragement, exhortation, or didactic in conveying Christian morals? Moreover, how does end-times prophecy intersect with these areas?

Consoling or Exhorting?

The main literary genre of 1 and 2 Thessalonians being epistolary is not questioned. It bears all the standard marks of ancient letter writing, with only slight variations (such as apparent co-authors, 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess

[8] Among the glosses for the adverb ἀτάκτως in the context of 2 Thess 3 are "free loading, sponging" (BDAG, 148), and "disorderly fashion" and "neglectfully" (MSG, 328).

[9] Rafael Rodriguez, *The First Christian Letters: Reading 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Eugene: Cascade, 2024), 14.

[10] Ibid., 90, n.9.

[11] Ibid., 85.

2:1).[12] Though scholars Steve Walton, Duane Watson, and Ben Witherington have offered valuable insights by way of rhetorical criticism (are these letters deliberative, judicial, or epideictic? [13]), the simple fact is that there are no recorded speeches in either 1 or 2 Thessalonians. Drawing socio-historical insights from rhetorical conventions, therefore, must be done within the bounds of literary analysis which also comes with caveats.

While all agree that Paul's canonized correspondence with the Thessalonian church takes the form of epistolary genre, what scholars debate is the *type* of epistolary literature, if any one type at all. The broad categories Pauline scholars generally offer for the two letters is *paraclectic* ("consoling") and *paraenetic* ("ethical exhortation"). Are they one or the other? Or are they both? Nijay Gupta surveys scholars such as Karl Donfried, Abraham Smith, and Donald Hagner as advocates for 1 and 2 Thessalonians being *paracletic*.[14] Beverly Gaventa is a good example as she argues, "In common with the crafters of love letters, Paul does not write to convey data, but to express his *affection* and communicate his *concern*."[15] Those siding with the Thessalonian epistles being more paraenetic—offering moral exhortation—include Abraham Malherbe, David Aune, and Luke Timothy Johnson. In his analysis, Malherbe goes so far as to suggest connections between Paul's ethical injunctions and the pagan moral philosophers of his day.[16]

As with rhetorical criticism, a bit of caution should be exercised when assigning modern conventions for ancient literature. This is because a case can be made for either category—paracletic *or* paraenetic—as Paul seamlessly interweaves words of both consolation and moral exhortation while addressing the Thessalonian situation in light of eschatology. The apostle is *paracletic* when he consoles these new believers "not to grieve as others do who have no hope" when instructing them on the *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 as they will be "caught up, raptured" (ἁρπαγησόμεθα) by the Lord with other believers and will always be together with Christ. He is pastoral and comforts them with, "God has not destined us for wrath" (5:9), therefore, these young believers were to "encourage one another and build one another up, just as [they were] doing" (v. 11). And yet, Paul is also *paraenetic* in his clear exhortations that involve the ethics of working and trade: "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess 3:10), and "not to defraud [one's] brother in this matter" (1 Thess 4:6). He exhorted them to "to mind one's own affairs" and to "labor with their own hands," just as he "instructed / charged" [παρηγγείλαμεν] them (4:11). For these reasons, it is best to adopt Gupta's counsel, which refuses to choose an either/or option, instead preferring a both/and approach: "For my part," contends Gupta, "I am skeptical about the usefulness of assigning 1 Thessalonians [and presumably 2 Thessalonians] to a specific epistolary letter-type. If I had to choose, I might prefer a 'mixed' type because I think the reader ought not to be forced to decide between "consoling" and "paraenetic."[17]

By way of the eschatology conveyed in Paul's prophetic statements concerning the *parousia*, the entire contents of both 1 and 2 Thessalonians are consoling, didactic, *and* ethical. Even with a didactic text

---

[12] E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004), 32–46; 122–155.

[13] Steve Walton, "What has Aristotle to do with Paul? Rhetorical Criticism and 1 Thessalonians," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 2 (1995): 229–250; Duane F. Watson, "Three Species of Rhetoric and the Study of the Pauline Epistles," *in Paul and Rhetoric*, eds., J. Paul Sampley and Peter Lampe (London: Bloomsbury), 25–47; Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 30.

[14] Nijay K. Gupta, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, ZCINT, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 30.

[15] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 40, quoted in Ibid., 30, n.34. Emphasis added.

[16] Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians,* AB (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 81–86.

[17] Gupta, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 30.

as forbidding as the man of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:1–12), Paul's teaching intricately connects both *paraenesis* and *postoralia* as moral exhortation goes hand in glove with consolation and encouragement.[18] In the end, there remains no compelling reason for the interpreter to choose any one specific literary category over another for 1 and 2 Thessalonians in order to understand their ethics in light of Christ's *parousia*. Paul's teaching on the abrupt appearing of Christ was meant to instruct, consol, and exhort. These elements comprise their sanctification as Paul calls the Thessalonian believers to live out holy lives in light of the *parousia* (1 Thess 4:3). Such ethics are not an exception but a demand for God's people.[19]

Early History of 1 and 2 Thessalonians

The earliest known manuscript of Pauline letters that include fragments of both 1 and 2 Thessalonians is 𝔓[30] (Oxyrhynchus 1598) which dates to the early third century.[20] Contemporary debates over the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians aside, from a very early period, the apostolic authority of both epistles was accepted as genuine. Such is evident in the writings themselves, otherwise there is no force in Paul's words: "If anyone does not *obey* what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thess 3:14, emphasis added). As Benjamin Laird observes, "The apostles certainly had their personal limitations and shortcomings, yet the authority of their teaching was widely recognized throughout the Christian world."[21] The apostolic authority of 1 and 2 Thessalonians was recognized during the primitive eras of church history and remained virtually uncontested for 19 centuries.

Mentioned earlier was the scholarly consensus of the early dating of 1 Thessalonians (with some debate concerning 2 Thessalonians). In a recent monograph arguing for the early composition of the New Testament, Jonathan Bernier dates the Thessalonian letters no later than A.D. 52, a mere two decades following the crucifixion of Christ.[22] Doing so situates Paul's writing to the Thessalonian church just after his visit to the city in Acts 17, during his eighteen-month sojourn to Corinth (Acts 18:11) and before composing any other of his canonical literature. The only possible exception of an earlier Pauline writing is Galatians, which may have been written about the same time if not a year or two before 1 and 2 Thessalonians.[23]

Thessalonica was an important city, a capital of one of four major districts in Macedonia.[24] It was named after Alexander the Great's step-sister who was married to one of his generals, Cassander, several

---

[18] Phillip G. Zeigler, "How it Ends: Brief Remarks on Reading 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12," *Pro Ecclesia* 31, no. 1 (2022): 47.

[19] Gupta, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 101. Emphasis in original.

[20] Benjamin P. Laird, *The Pauline Corpus in Early Christianity: Its Formation, Publication, and Circulation* (Peabody: Hendrickson Academic, 2022), 42. Larid states the MS likely originally included a collection of Pauline letters (319); cf. Phillip Wesley Comfort and David P. Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Papyri 1–72,* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), 112–114.

[21] Benjamin P. Laird, *Creating the Canon: Composition, Controversy, and the Authority of the New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic 2023), 180. Laird also offers a strong linguistic defense of Paul's co-authors, Silvanus and Timothy (1 Thess 1:2; 2 Thess 2:1), sharing in Paul's apostolic authority by the use of the considerable amount of first-person verbs and pronouns throughout the letters (40).

[22] Jonathan Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence of Early Composition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 146–149.

[23] Cf. Ibid., 163.

[24] The historical and archeological data in this section was informed by the following recourses: F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC 45 (Waco: Word, 1982), xix–xxvii; Richard S. Ascough, "Thessalonica," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1300. David Lang, *The*

hundred years before these letters were written. Thessalonica was declared to be a "free city" by Emperor Augusts in the first century BC, as multiple cities were in the Roman Empire (such as Tarsus, Paul's birthplace). This means the city did not require a standing army to control any resistance to Rome. It retained the rights to be governed according to its own ancestral laws and appoint its own officials, such as a local senate administered by a "proconsul" acting as governor for a short period. Two archeological discoveries confirm the history of Paul's travels in Thessalonica in Acts 17 as well help pinpoint the date of writing the letters, which this paper argues is very early.

The first pertains to a unique phrase found only twice in the NT (both in Acts 17). In 17:6, Luke records that a Jewish mob dragged a man before the πολιτάρχης ("city authorities") for opening his home to Paul and Silas while the two were ministering in Thessalonica. This rare word used twice in the same passage appears nowhere else in the Bible, including the LXX. Apart from Acts, the word appears only in a few ancient Greek inscriptions. As a result of the word's rarity, many critical scholars dismissed Luke as a historian, casting doubt if Paul ever was ever actually in Thessalonica as reported in Acts. However, in the late nineteenth century, the word πολιτάρχης was discovered inscribed on an arch stone in none other than Thessalonica, framing the west entrance of the city. This discovery affirmed the historical accounts of Luke and places Paul in Thessalonica exactly as Acts says.

The second discovery enabled scholars to pinpoint with virtual certainty the early date of composition of both Thessalonian epistles. Acts 18 reports that Paul spent a year and a half ministering in the city Corinth, which overlapped with the tenure of the proconsul named Gallio (vv. 11–17). Proconsuls were sometimes military, but more often civilians, who served as acting governors over a city for one year. In the early twentieth century archeologists found an inscription at the site of the Temple of Apollo in the city of Delphi (central Greece) containing a greeting from the Roman emperor Claudius (also mentioned in Acts) to the local citizens, and refers to the proconsul *Gallio* by name. This discovering helped determine the dates of these events of Paul in Thessalonica, and him writing two letters to the church there. Not only does the finding corroborate Luke's report that Gallio was proconsul in Thessalonica, but the inscription also contained that year of Emperor Claudius's reign, which in the current dating-system is AD 51. An inference is that Gallio served as a proconsul in Thessalonica from approximately summer of 51 to summer of 52, resulting in the same date-range for the composition of the Thessalonian epistles, predating the Gospels and virtually the entire New Testament corpus.[25]

The Foundational Importance of Eschatology

Not only is the early dating of 1 and 2 Thessalonians relevant as it indicates this church lacked the New Testament writings, but so is the absence of any explicit Jewish background in the letters. There are no Old Testament quotations in either 1 or 2 Thessalonians. This suggests that the first readers were largely gentile and without any other biblical literature.[26] As such, the original recipients of Paul's earliest letters were presumably new gentile converts to the Christian Faith and undeveloped in their theology. In modern lingo, the recipients of the Thessalonian letters were a "baby church," full of baby Christians.

Accordance Dictionary of Place Names (Altamonte Springs: Oaktree Software, n.d.), 532; and J. W. Simpson Jr., "Thessalonians, Letters to The," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1993), 662–666.

[25] Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," in *the Expositor's Bible Commentary: Abridged Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 844, argues for an even earlier date of no later than Spring of A.D. 50.

[26] Though some possible OT allusions exist in the Thessalonians letters that may assume previous Jewish knowledge.

Remarkably, the first divinely written-revelation they received largely addressed not soteriology, but eschatology.

Indeed, twenty-six percent of 1 Thessalonians concerns the future (23 out of 89 verses), while forty percent of 2 Thessalonians are also prophetic (19 out of 47 verses). Combined, both letters are one-third eschatologically related (42 out of 136 verses total). Because of their overwhelmingly prophetic content, Richard Mayhue refers to 1 and 2 Thessalonians as the "the eschatological epistles," and offers a dozen reasons why prophetic literature is so important for the Christian.[27] Future events like the imminent "catching up" and subsequent Day of the Lord fill major portions in the first epistle (1 Thess 4:13–5:11). The return of Christ in judgment as well as the rise and fall of future "man of lawlessness" take up almost two-thirds of the second epistle (2 Thess 1:5–2:12).

That prophetic-eschatology is so prominent in these two letters to a newly established church demonstrates that end-times teaching is a *basic, fundamental doctrine*. Taking as cues the early dating of 1 and 2 Thessalonians along with their substantive content, eschatology should be taught first, not last. Eschatology is not merely to be the focus of academic discourse or reduced to theological camps arguing for their preferred millennial positions. And, when taught, it should certainly not be for the mere fulfilling of intellectual curiosity or result in spiritual lethargy. The eschatology of 1 and 2 Thessalonians was intended to affect and motivate present living.

The Relevance of the Parousia

According to Pauline thought eschatology matters not only for knowing the future, but for living the Christian life in the present. In his first epistle to the church at Thessalonica, Paul directly connects the "catching up" of the church (4:17) not to a pessimistic attitude about the future, but to personal sanctification in the present. In 4:16 he says Christ will descend with a "shout" (NASB/NKJV) or "cry of command" (ESV). Save an obscure reference in Proverbs 30:27 (LXX), the noun form κέλευσμα is a hapax legomena, restricting what nuances can be pulled from it biblically. Its semantic usage elsewhere ranges from a summons to carry out a battle engagement to encouraging words given to animals.[28]

Drawing from Psalm 47:5 (46:6 LXX), Gordon Fee believes Paul is applying the enthronement language of this "Psalm of Ascent" to describe the coming from heaven of Jesus Christ, who is now pictured as "descending" in a way similar to the "descent" of Yahweh at Sinai. "Whether Paul would have understood any of this language to be taken literally is in itself moot," contends Fee, "since his only reason for including it at all is to give expression to the heavenly summons that is intended figuratively to "awaken the dead.'"[29] But should readers understand Paul's language as solely figurative? It seems the apostle was more didactic here with what the Thessalonians should expect surrounding the appearing of Christ. F. F. Bruce suggests a more literal reading by highlighting the noun's military sense saying, "Here it is the Lord himself who shouts the quickening word, which commands a ready and obedient response (cf. John 5:25)."[30] In v. 17, Paul explicitly uses the future passive plural form of ἁρπάζω which translates "caught up together (NASB/ESV/NKJV). The Latin Vulgate uses the first-person plural future passive verb *rapiemur* (lemma,

---

[27] Richard Mayhue, *1 & 2 Thessalonians: Triumphs and Trials of a Consecrated Church* (Fern Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 1999), 15, 141–142.

[28] BDAG, 538; MGS, 1111; *NIDNTTE*, 655.

[29] Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 97.

[30] Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 100.

rapio), which in English transliterates as "rapture." A sense of urgency permeates the text as there are no signs preceding Jesus's call of command or shout here. It is imminent, at any time.

Though some scholars push back against the idea of a "secret rapture of the church" in 1 Thessalonians 4, their reasoning for doing so is often less than convincing. For example, Fee believes that for Paul to have intended an imminent rapture at the *parousia* in v. 17 would demand previous instruction about it to the young church, which is lacking in the text.[31] Yet is this assumption necessary? Does the miracle of inspiration require biblical revelation to be disclosed previously in order for it to end up on papyrus or parchment? What in the inspiration or inscripturation process precludes Paul from disclosing something for the first time to this church while writing with divine authority? In any case, Paul does seem to suggest he instructed them previously about this event. In 2 Thessalonians Paul writes to the same church about events surrounding the same *parousia,* such as the revealing of the future man of lawlessness and Day of the Lord (2:1–12). He then asks, "Do you not remember that when *I was still with you I told you these things*?"(v. 5, emphasis added).[32] As very little time elapsed between the composition of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, no scholar believes Paul visited the same church in the short time between the two letters. His sole visit would be what is recorded in Acts 17, and the two letters written without an intervening visit. It is perfectly reasonable, therefore, to understand Paul's reminder in 2 Thessalonians as including *all* of his relevant eschatological teaching as oral instruction during his only visit to these young believers. If that is the case, they did indeed receive some previous instruction on what Fee and others term "the secret rapture of the church" or *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.[33] Still, this is not a doctrine that Paul hoped would keep heads in the clouds. It is one of encouragement that Christians will meet together with the Lord in the clouds. But until then, believers are to remain in this world and live in such a way that brings honor to Christ who is coming to receive them to Himself (cf. John 14:1–3).

While the sound of this event may be startling as a battle cry, it also pictures encouragement, hope, and healing. If one were to grant Fee's connection of Psalm 47 to the *parousia,* shouts of joy and acclamation envelope that psalm (vv. 6, 9). For believers in Christ the *parousia* is not a doctrine of terror; it is one of adulation. At the *parousia*, all suffering experienced by believers in this age of the church will cease. The assumption of the church into heaven is the antidote to all affliction and oppression that Christians all over the world experience on a daily basis.[34] Such is a radical motivator for living faithfully until that day. Ultimately, the Thessalonians were not to look for *something* to happen, but rather for *someone* to come. The appearing of Christ in that moment is what Paul describes elsewhere as "our blessed hope" (Titus 2:13). This is why the apostle can say to the young Thessalonian church to "encourage one another with these words" (1 Thess 4:18), when referring to the same event.

The *parousia* of Christ is a doctrine that inspires active discipleship and daily sanctification in all areas of life. The Thessalonians were to live lives "controlling their own body in holiness and honor" (1 Thess 4:4). They were to show "love to one another" (v. 9). They were to maintain ethics in their businesses, "to aspire to live quite lives and to mind you own affairs, and to work with your hands," just as Paul instructed them (v. 11). All of these directions were given in light of the promise of "being caught up [ἁρπάζω] together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (v. 17). The practical relevance of the any-

[31] Fee, *The First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians*, 98.

[32] The plural accusative ταῦτα need not be restricted to the immediate "things" in 2 Thess but can account for Paul's eschatological teaching in 1 Thess as well.

[33] This is implied as much in Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, xxxvii, as well as in John F. Walvoord and Mark Hitchcock, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, TJWPC (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 67.

[34] I expand on this further in Cory M. Marsh, "The Rapture: Cosmic Segregation or Antidote for Oppression? A Critical Response to the 'Racial Ideology of Rapture,'" *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 60–79.

moment appearing of Christ is not lost on scholars. "As far as 1 Thessalonians is concerned," notes Gupta, "the emphasis is on [present] life shaped in light of the hope of the *parosuia*."[35] The lesson that emerges from the *parousia* texts in 1 Thessalonians is relevant: *hope in the future produces holiness in the present.*

Second Thessalonians is similar. Reflecting on the future expectations of 2 Thessalonians, Phillip Ziegler relays "how this focal eschatological concern presses with power upon—and so interferes with—the present."[36] Likely written only a few months later, this second epistle has much the same tenor*: knowledge of the future motivates living in the present.* While in his previous letter, Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to live a sanctified life before the imminent appearing of Christ, his second letter to the same church focused on the future the Day of the Lord and the coming Man of Lawlessness as additional motivators for daily living while awaiting the *parousia*. In his commentary Calvin argued, "Unquestionably the love of God cannot reign in us unless brotherly love is also exercised. *Waiting for Christ*, on the other hand, teaches us to exercise contempt for the world, mortification of the flesh, and endurance of the cross."[37] Though the church is promised escape from this future period of wrath (cf. 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9), the knowledge of such impending doom, nevertheless, should humble believers in their daily lives and spur them onto holiness and more love for the brethren while there is still time to do so.

Like in his previous letter, the apostle connects a knowledge of the future with a life in the present that reflects hope even in the mundane ethics of work and paying bills, "not being lazy busybodies" (2 Thess 3:11), "nor growing weary in doing good" (3:13).[38] In light of the *parousia*, used twice in 2 Thessalonians reference to Christ (2:1, 8), these early Christians were not to be idle as in passively waiting to be raptured. Instead, Paul commanded them to work for their daily sustenance (3:10), and "to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" (v. 12). They were even to apply church discipline on those who were so preoccupied to fly in the sky that they refused to earn their keep within the community—all while anticipating the *parousia* (vv. 13–14).

The Practicality of the Parousia

As argued thus far, the *parousia* texts in 1 and 2 Thessalonian were not intended merely to instruct about the future. They were also intended as practical implications for the present. Bruce argued that "it is the ethical implications that are chiefly stressed" in Paul's doctrine of the *parousia*.[39] He is not alone as dispensational scholars also defend the practicality and relevance of the *parousia,* contrary to popular caricatures of their supposed pessimism, obsessions over prophecy charts, and fixation over being "left behind."[40] John Walvoord and Mark Hitchcock, for example, contend the many problems Christians face in this life such as disease, pain, sorrow, etc. will be made right at the *parousia*. "We can face the trials and

[35] Gupta, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 90. I italicized *parousia* for consistency though the original quote does not.

[36] Phillip G. Zeigler, "How it Ends: Brief Remarks on Reading 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12," 44.

[37] John Calvin, *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. XXI, trans. William Pringle (orig., 1550; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 351. Emphasis in original.

[38] Gupta, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 233, says, "The problem is not that these troublemakers are doing *nothing* but rather they refuse to work and intentionally behave in a counterproductive way." Emphasis in original.

[39] Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, xxxviii.

[40] For example, Mike Wilson, *Leaving Left Behind: How Positivity will Help Christians Flourish* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2021); and Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

challenges of life because God has given us this blessed hope of the Lord's return," they say. "May we take it to heart, *live in its reality*, and be refreshed by its truth."[41]

This focus on present living in light of the *parousia* is shared by other dispensational scholars. One is Richard Mayhue who synthesizes both letters' theological importance and comprises nine major themes—only one of which focuses on future events.[42] The other eight include pastoral emphases, spiritual emphases, and missional emphases addressing topic like evangelism, church planting, sanctification, encouraging the saints, and church discipline. "Paul's reason for writing [to the Thessalonians]," argues Mayhue, "flowed from his shepherd's heart which was concerned about the flock from which he had been separated….Paul writes to bolster which is growing in the midst of painful trials."[43]

Similarly, Robert Thomas gave three reasons why Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, all of which focus on practical matters such as defending his apostolic credentials and addressing the spiritual condition of the church there. When summarizing the main idea of the very passages addressing the "catching up" at the *parousia* and subsequent Day of the Lord (4:1–5:24), Thomas states it was "to suggest specific ways in which the already strong Christian behavior of the Thessalonians could be improved as they lived a life of holiness."[44] These are unexpected comments from those who are often maligned for their eschatology being supposedly irrelevant to daily Christian life.

Paul does not offer any specific dates for the *parouisa*. His teaching on the unexpectedness of the event was not intended to be reduced to prophecy charts. Nor was it to provoke a floorless pool of date-setting speculation. Rather, "He turns their attention away from timetable theories towards faithfulness and upright behavior *today*. The *timing* doesn't matter, if, in waiting for the master, you are *always* at work in your duties."[45] Paul's eschatology is reminiscent of Jesus's parable of the wise manager in Luke 12 whose protagonist is "blessed" for his faithful service upon his master's sudden return (v. 43).[46] As the story ends, the lesson become clear: "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more" (v. 38).

First and 2 Thessalonians require much from their readers. We might not know the exact timing of the Lord's *parousia*, but that is intentional. We are not meant to know the *when*, just the *what*. In Fee's words, "the coming is totally 'unexpected' in terms of precise timing."[47] Christ's appearance will be sudden and imminent, heralded by the blast of a cosmic shofar (1 Thess 4:17; cf. 1 Cor 15:52). Without warning, Christians will be "caught up" (ἁρπαγησόμεθα) into the blissful presence of their Lord. Still, knowing this fact of divine revelation comes with responsibility. It guides the reader into faithful service here in the present while awaiting such imminent eschatology. As J. N. Darby argued, Paul's teaching of the sudden appearing of Christ "is not merely formally meant as a doctrine; it is linked with every spiritual relationship of our souls, it is displayed in all the circumstances of the Christian's life."[48] The Christian lives and works and loves steadily with the hope of Christ's *parousia*, even through the quotidian of life. Rewards await for those who spend their witnesses living fully present in the mundane. There is a compelling urgency even while waiting for future events, knowing that our labor *while* we wait is never in vain (1 Cor 15:58). As Darby saw it, this was the very reason for salvation: "We are converted in order to wait for Him. The joy of

---

[41] Walvoord and Hitchcock, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 82. Emphasis added.

[42] Mayhue*, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 26, 29.

[43] Ibid., 25, 28.

[44] Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," 844.

[45] Nijay K. Gupta, *1–2 Thessalonians*, NCCS (Eugene: Cascade, 2016), 15. Emphasis in original.

[46] Gupta also leverages Luke 12: 41–48 for support of his quote above.

[47] Fee, *The First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians*, 96.

[48] J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible: Colossians–Revelation* (London: Cooper and Budd, 1949), 5:43.

the saints in the fruits of their labors is realised [*sic*] in His presence. It is at the coming of Christ that holiness has its value, its measure being seen in that which is manifested."[49]

In these two epistles, holiness, discipleship, encouragement, love, and work are snatched out of the mundane routines of daily Christian life. They become the tangible expression of our knowing the future return of Jesus is about to happen, and with them, we face the standard experiences of living—from boredom to bedlam—with the cosmic surety of Christ's *parousia*. Paul's letters to the Thessalonians reminds us that what we have received from the past offers us a surer footing for facing a tumultuous present or uncertain future.[50] As it turns out, at the *parousia* what was originally thought to be routine living is revealed as not so mundane. Every bit of waiting and working, fair trade dealings and hospitality, every act of genuine kindness and integrity against a highly sexualized and corrupt culture will be revealed as moments of glory for the King of glory upon His return.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that 1 and 2 Thessalonians speaks of eschatological hope for believers to form spiritually, both individually and communally, during the present age before the *parousia* even during routine matters of life. Additionally, it contended that the prominence of eschatology in these two letters addressed to a "baby church" demonstrates that eschatology is a fundamental biblical doctrine that should be taught to Christians with urgency rather than left as a final doctrine as in systematics. The eschatology of 1 and 2 Thessalonian was shown to be ethical to the core and relevant to Christian sanctification. Speaking words of both exhortation and encouragement to the Thessalonians in light of the imminent *parousia*, an obvious implication emerges that impacts Christian living: views on the future affect lives in the present. To the Thessalonians in particular, Paul gave a cosmic incentive for how they were to behave in daily life. He expected that hope in the *parosuia* would produces holiness while waiting for it.

[49] J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible,* 5:43–44.
[50] Rodriguez, 111.