

The Significance of the Return of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians

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Introduction

The letters to the Thessalonians are widely believed to be the earliest, or at least among the earliest, of the canonical letters of Paul.¹ It is all the more significant, therefore, that the theme of the future return of Jesus Christ (often described as the

¹ Among those who regard 1 Thessalonians as the earliest of Paul's letters are R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 456; R. B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 21; G. D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 39. Despite such strong support for this position, I would favour placing Galatians as the earliest letter (written just before the Jerusalem Council in AD 49), with the Thessalonian correspondence dated around AD 49/50. See D. A. Carson, D. J. Moo and L. L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992) for supporting evidence and discussion.

‘Parousia’) is prominent throughout both of these letters, in that they demonstrate that this was one of Paul’s strongly held convictions from an early point in his ministry. Indeed, with a little more narrow focus, Howard Marshall states that “the prominence of the parousia in 1 Thessalonians can scarcely be exaggerated.”²

It would seem that from Paul’s earliest days as an apostle of Jesus Christ, he held firmly to the belief that Jesus would return bodily to earth, no more as a baby or even a man in humility but as Lord.³ Indeed, Paul uses the term κύριος (Lord) frequently in both of his letters to the Thessalonians,⁴ suggesting that his eschatology and his Christology are closely related. This point is emphasised by Ben Witherington who writes,

[Paul’s] thought has an eschatological framework from start to finish, but unless we bear in mind the interplay of Paul’s soteriology, Christology and theology with that eschatological framework we will not fully understand his thinking. The eschatological framework is shaped especially by Paul’s belief that Jesus is the crucified and risen Messiah who has *already* made salvation available to all but has *not yet* completed the full work of salvation.⁵

² Marshall, “The Parousia in the New Testament – and Today” in M. J. Wilkins and T. Paige (eds), *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 201.

³ J. Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 67: “The present epistle discloses that the Lord’s coming has been in the forefront of Paul’s thinking.” It is interesting to note that Luke, a close colleague of Paul’s, lays particular emphasis on the bodily ascension of Jesus (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11). Paul’s conviction regarding the bodily return of Jesus is precisely the expectation which the angelic messengers of Acts 1:11 call for.

⁴ Dunn notes that the term appears 24 times in 1 Thessalonians and 22 times in 2 Thessalonians, “a higher proportion than in any of Paul’s other letters”, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (T&T Clark, 1998) 297, n. 15.

⁵ Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992) 154.

The purpose of this paper is to consider *why* Paul incorporates consideration of the return of Jesus into this letter. Is it a doctrinal diversion along the way, or does this concept have a significant impact on the theological and pastoral power of this letter?

Terminology

The term *παρουσία* (*parousia*) occurs 14 times in the 13 Pauline letters, and of these occurrences, 4 are found in 1 Thessalonians.⁶ The term has a fairly flexible range of meanings such as ‘presence’ or ‘arrival,’ and is used on several occasions in the NT of human beings.⁷ However, it is most frequently associated with the future return of the Lord Jesus Christ – his “Messianic Advent in glory to judge the world at the end of this age”⁸ – and this is certainly the sense required in each of the four occurrences of the noun in 1 Thessalonians. It is worth noting that the idea of ‘return’ is not inherent in the term but is determined by the context in which the term is used. The term is never used of Jesus’ ‘first coming’ in the incarnation.

Of course, the concept of the future return of Jesus is expressed in other ways throughout the letter, also, and it is important to beware of the assumption that the absence of a particular term in any given passage implies the absence of a theological theme. We will attempt to take note of all relevant passages in what follows.

Paul’s Use of the Theme of the Return of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians

I wish to argue that the references to the future return of Jesus that are to be found in 1 Thessalonians are not theological redundancies, simply included to demonstrate Paul’s orthodoxy. Nor are they used in a mechanical way, bearing the same

⁶ References in 1 Thessalonians: 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23. References in other Pauline letters: 1 Cor 15:23; 16:17; 2 Cor 7:6; 7:7; 10:10; Phil 1:26; 2:12; 2 Thess 2:1; 2:8; 2:9.

⁷ For example, 2 Cor 7:6, 7; Phil 1:26. See BDAG, *s.v.*

⁸ BDAG, *s.v.*

significance in each case. Rather, Paul includes these references purposefully in his letter so as to provoke a variety of responses from his readers, and it is to these important passages that we now turn.

a) Jesus' return as the focus of Christian hope (1:9-10)

The first reference to Jesus' return in 1 Thessalonians appears in Paul's opening narration of the previous events in his relationship with the Thessalonian believers that provide the backdrop to what he has to say now. Paul begins with commendation for their acceptance of his preaching and their subsequent faithful Christian witness. He then goes on to indicate what has been particularly impressive in the eyes of those who observe them. He writes,

[9] For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, [10] and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

These words indicate that part of Paul's definition of Christian conversion to the living God involves a new expectation of the return of Jesus in the future. Indeed, we may say with J. D. G. Dunn and R. B. Hays that the prominence of this theme in the letter, and particularly in this recitation of the experience of the Thessalonians, indicates that the return of Jesus was probably a significant element of the preaching of Paul when he was in Thessalonica.⁹ What is interesting, however, is that the emphasis is not placed on the future event (which is not actually described) so much as on the person who is anticipated. The person, of course, is Jesus. He is the crucified one (implicit in the reference to 'the dead'), but also the one whom God raised.¹⁰ Thus Paul

⁹ Dunn, *Theology*, 302-3. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 22.

¹⁰ Compare Galatians 1:1 for Paul's identification of God by means of reference to his act of raising Jesus from the dead.

links two defining ‘eschatological’ events,¹¹ the resurrection of Jesus in the first century AD, which places all who are in Christ in the ‘age to come’, and the return of Jesus at some undefined time in the future, which will bring their experience of the age to come to its fulfilment. The one for whom the Thessalonians eagerly wait is “[God’s] Son”;¹² a description which highlights the intimacy of their newly established relationship with “the living and true God” to whom they have turned.

Paul’s summary statement regarding Jesus encompasses a great deal of profound theology in a brief phrase – “who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” This gives us insight into the reason for the watchful expectation of the Thessalonians. Paul links the events of the cross with the return of Jesus. The latter will bring about the full experience of the former, and will bring about the final confirmation that judgement will not fall on the people of God. The relationship of sonship explains how Jesus can rescue us from the wrath that is God’s. On the other hand, these words serve to highlight the consistent NT theme that Jesus will come as Judge to administer God’s judgement (*cf.* Matt 25:31-46; 2 Timothy 4:1-8).¹³

In tension with the future emphasis, however, it is also important to avoid the impression that Paul encourages the Thessalonians to gaze out of the window watching for an absent friend. The present tense of the verb ‘rescues’ indicates that though physically absent, Jesus is not really absent from his

¹¹ ‘Eschatological’ is used here not as a description of events that will occur (in popular thought) ‘at the end of the world.’ Rather it is intended to reflect Paul’s conviction that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has ushered in the expected ‘age to come.’ Thus, a Christian believer in the first century AD was, even then, in the midst of an ‘eschatological’ event (*cf.* Gal 1:4; 1 Cor 10:11).

¹² See M. Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God* (London: SCM, 1986), 8-10 on Paul’s use of the term ‘Son’ to encapsulate the content of his gospel.

¹³ *Cf.* 1QpHab 8:1-3: “This refers to all those who obey the Law among the Jews whom God will rescue from among those doomed to judgement, because of their suffering and their loyalty to the Teacher of Righteousness” (M. Wise, M. Abegg and E. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* [Harper, 1996])

people but works in them by his Spirit (cf. 1:5) so that rescue is in fact a present experience.¹⁴

We should recognise the balance in Paul's statement that apparently was not shared by all Christians at the time.¹⁵ Paul indicates that conversion, negatively, involves a turning away from idols,¹⁶ and, positively, involves a turning towards "a living and true God."¹⁷ Paul emphasizes that this turning is accomplished in order that the new Christians might 'serve' God, thus deeply rooting their Christian lives in the present reality of first century life.¹⁸ Thus the expectation of the future return of Jesus, though essential to Paul's theology, is not the whole story. Christians must take on their responsibilities in the present circumstances, but they have the hope of Jesus' return to spur them on. We may conclude, then that Jesus' return is the focus of Christian hope.

b) Jesus' return as the occasion for rejoicing in Christian relationships (2:19-20)

The term *παρουσία* is first employed in 2:19. It appears in a section of the letter in which Paul is expressing his deep affection for the believers in Thessalonica. He writes passionately,

[17] As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you – in person, not in heart – we

¹⁴ Compare 1 Cor 1:18 for a similar use of the present tense, where Paul contrasts "those who are being saved" with "those who are perishing." See G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford, 1994) for discussion of the "three tenses of salvation."

¹⁵ Cf. The problems dealt with in 2 Thessalonians, such as abandonment of daily responsibilities.

¹⁶ In his *Introduction*, R. E. Brown notes that Thessalonica was "marked by a multiplicity of cults, reflecting the mixture of the population. Archaeology and historical records indicate places for worshiping the Roman pantheon and the emperor, as well as a host of Oriental deities" (458).

¹⁷ Although the Greek phrase is anarthrous (without the definite article), the words on the lips of a Jew (let alone a Christian Jew) such as Paul was would be unequivocally monotheistic and definite.

¹⁸ So Hays, *Moral Vision*, 22.

longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.

Despite Paul's fervent hope to visit these believers personally, "Satan blocked our way" (18). This, however, is not permitted to be a hindrance to encouraging and up-building fellowship. The very difficulties that Paul speaks of here provided the occasion for his various letters, including 1 Thessalonians, that now bring the Father's message of grace and mercy to the world and, as always, God's providence overruled. In a bold expression of warm love and commitment, Paul writes,

[19] For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? [20] Yes, you are our glory and joy!

The *παρουσία* is brought into a discussion of a very ordinary logistical problem, but its significance is that it provides a prospective forum for the rejoicing of Paul and his colleagues in their relationship with the Thessalonian Christians. Paul will 'boast' in the believers whom the Lord has brought to himself through the ministry of Paul, and thus Paul regards the *παρουσία* as a spur towards mission. Paul clearly understands his ministry to be carried out in the context of the eschatological event of Jesus' return (cf. 2 Tim 4:1-8), and his ministry as an apostle will be authenticated publicly by the presence of those believers on the day Jesus returns.¹⁹ The language of the 'victor's wreath' (*στέφανου*)²⁰ suggests that Paul will receive recognition for his faithful service as an apostle, and that will take the form of the presence of the believers before Jesus.²¹

But the impact of this reference in the context of a letter addressed to believers in difficult circumstances is that it allows Paul to indicate in the *present* what his actions will be in the *future*. Thus the Thessalonians are informed immediately of

¹⁹ So C. A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1&2 Thessalonians* (Grand rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 123.

²⁰ See BDAG, *s.v.*

²¹ Cf 1 Cor 9:25.

Paul's rejoicing in them (and therefore encouraged by that fact), while they are also made aware of the fact that Paul anticipates boasting about them at the *παρουσία* of Jesus.

The rhetorical power of Paul's question (to which the answer is assumed to be quite evident) is heightened by the joining of three terms: 'hope', 'joy', and 'crown of boasting'. This language is closely echoed elsewhere in Paul in Phil 4:1. Although these terms are separated by the word 'or', they should not be regarded as mutually exclusive alternatives but rather as mutually enhancing perspectives. The Thessalonians are all of these things to Paul, and no doubt more besides. Wanamaker comments,

The pathos of Paul's language in 1 Thessalonians 2, which is unique in his letters, perhaps suggests that the Thessalonians were particularly dear to Paul.²²

We may take Wanamaker's general point, even if the evidence of Philippians suggests that Paul's language here is not quite so unique as is claimed. Reinforcing such language, Paul uses the term 'brothers' (including 'sisters',²³) fourteen times in this fairly short letter²⁴ indicating his view of the Christian family. He is committed to these people now so that his rejoicing in the future will simply reflect the reality of the relationship. Once more we can see that the reality of Jesus' return is by no means an abstract theological notion for Paul but has a significant impact on his present life. He clearly believes that it will be a real encouragement to the Thessalonians if they take it seriously too.

c) Jesus' return as the climax of Christian holiness (3:13 and 5:23)

The third relevant passage, and the second occurrence of *παρουσία*, is in 3:13, in the context of a pastoral prayer:

²² Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 123.

²³ See BDAG and the footnotes in the recently published *English Standard Version* of the Bible.

²⁴ See, Brown, *Introduction*, 459.

[11] Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. [12] And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. [13] And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

There are several conceptual and verbal parallels between this passage and the passage in 2:17-20. Firstly, there is the longing of Paul to be with the Thessalonians. Secondly, there is the warm expression of affection. Thirdly, there is a look ahead to the *παρουσία* of Jesus.

The fact that Paul can so effortlessly incorporate mention of Jesus' return into his pastoral writing indicates how integrated was this aspect of Christian conviction. The context of these words indicates something of the purpose that lies behind Paul's reference to the return of Jesus:

[7] For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. [8] For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. [9] How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? [10] Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

It is of supreme importance to Paul that the Thessalonian Christians should maintain their faith in Jesus Christ. In verse 7 he indicates that the faithfulness of the Thessalonians has been an encouragement to him in difficult times, and likewise now he will support them in prayer. This interdependence of Christians is a common theme in Paul's letters,²⁵ but also, in common with other letters, it is counter-balanced by a prayer that recognises the

²⁵ Philippians provides many appropriate examples.

gracious sovereign activity of the Father in preserving the believer to the end.

Holiness is a prominent theme in 1 Thessalonians. In a recent article, Jeffrey Weima has argued that this theme is closely related to what he calls the “heightened expectancy regarding Christ’s return”²⁶ found among the Thessalonians. In translation we do not readily see the relationship between ‘holiness’ (v. 13a) and ‘saints’ (v. 13c) that is clear in the Greek text, but as Paul refers to the ‘holy ones’ (probably, though not certainly, angels)²⁷ in the same breath as he speaks of the holiness of Christians, he offers us a captivating picture of what the Lord can do with a human being when he makes him or her truly ‘holy’. It is important to recognise with Hays that,

This is ... not an exhortation but a prayer. The Thessalonians are not being told to do something; rather, Paul is asking that *God* act in their lives to increase their love for one another and to sanctify them in preparation for the parousia.²⁸

²⁶ Weima, “ ‘How You Must Walk to Please God’: Holiness and Discipleship in 1 Thessalonians” in R. N. Longenecker (ed.) *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (MNTS 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 98-119, here 113.

²⁷ So Wanamaker, *Commentary*, 145; Best, *Epistles to the Thessalonians* (BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1971) 152f.; Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 102f.; cautiously Bruce, *1&2 Thessalonians* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1982) 73-4. As Bruce (among others) points out, there is an apparent allusion to the LXX text of Zech 14:5 where angelic beings would be the most natural referent (though Peterson, *Zechariah 9-14 & Malachi* (OTL; London: SCM, 1997) does mention Isa 4:3 as possible corroboration for the view that humans are in view (143). However, Peterson rejects this view.). See also L. J. Kreitzer, *Jesus and God in Paul’s Eschatology* (JSNTS 19; Sheffield, JSOT, 1987. This view also fits most naturally with sayings of Jesus such as those found in Mark 8:38 and Matthew 25:31. Similar use of language can be found in the DSS, e.g. 1QM (“War Scroll”) 1:16; 10:12; 12:6 (“together with Your holy ones [and] Your angels”); 16:1; 18:2. Morris, *Thessalonians* (111-12) points out the presence of the word παντη (‘all’), and argues that Paul may have intended both categories of creatures by this phrase. This latter view would comport with Paul’s comment in 4:14 where it is understood to refer to the souls of Christians who have died.

²⁸ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 22.

Thus the emphasis is placed upon what God will achieve in his people. On the other hand, these words also provide a counter-balance to any excessive expectation of holiness in this present fallen existence. Calvin comments,

Paul...does not explain the nature or the extent of the holiness of believers in this world, but desires that it may be increased until it reaches its perfection. For this reason he says *at the coming of our Lord*, meaning that the completion of what our Lord is now beginning in us is being delayed until that time.²⁹

The return of Jesus, then, is a touchstone both of hope and realism for the Christian who seeks holiness. The believer may be confident that he or she will attain what now seems so unattainable when God acts to bring his purposes for his people to their fullest expression at the coming of Jesus. However, that believer would be wise to recognise that only at that time will holiness be complete by an act of God's grace and that in the present it is necessary to be patient and to seek God's enabling to remain faithful. Unrealistic expectations of complete holiness prior to God's appointed time will only frustrate and concern Christians. Similar thought is expressed in Paul's closing words in this letter (5:23):

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a significant degree of overlap between these two texts, as can be seen by a comparison of the Greek text of both verses.

²⁹ Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 357.

3:13 εἰς τὸ στηριξάει ὑμῶν τὰς καρδίας ἀμεμπτους ἐν ἀγιωσύνῃ ἐμπροσθεν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πατρὸς ἡμῶν ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν ἰησοῦ μετὰ πάντων τῶν ἁγίων αὐτοῦ || [ἀμην] |

5:23 αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης ἁγιάσαι ὑμᾶς ὁλοτελεῖς καὶ ὁλοκλήρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχή καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀμεμπτῶς ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ τηρηθῆναι

In both cases the goal is holiness, but the one who will accomplish it in his people is “God himself” (5:23). However, the latter prayer is particularly noteworthy for its reference to “spirit and soul and body” combined with two adverbs, which may be translated ‘wholly’, and ‘complete’. This makes explicit the physical aspect of the *παρουσία* hope in Paul’s thought. Holiness is for the whole of the human being.

d) Jesus’ return as the herald of resurrection life

The third occurrence of *παρουσία* is found in 4:15, in the context of a passage dealing with death in the Christian community where Paul writes,

[13] But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. [14] For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. [15] For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. [16] For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with

the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. [17] Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. [18] Therefore encourage one another with these words.

In these words, Paul distinguishes the believers in Thessalonica (and, by extension, everywhere else) from the mass of humanity by the character of their grief. Unbelievers, he says, grieve with no hope. But what makes the difference? What is it that should give Christians hope?

In fact, it appears that the Thessalonians had little hope in that they were deeply concerned about the fate of their brothers and sisters who had died before the return of Jesus.³⁰ Thus these words of Paul serve to reflect the confusion of the early Christians about Jesus' return. They believed that it would happen, but when Jesus did not return during the lifetime of some of their number (a rather brief time if 1 Thessalonians is among the earliest of Paul's letters), the faith of those who remained was shaken. They were 'uninformed', at least to the extent that they had not grasped the significance of what Paul had previously taught them.³¹

This passage sheds important light on the hope of the Christian because it relates to two secure historical events – one in the past and another to come in the future. Paul first looks to the resurrection as an anchor point for the perplexed Thessalonians. He draws attention to the community's

³⁰ This conclusion drawn from 'mirror reading' Paul's letter (that is, attempting to discern the problem in Thessalonica from Paul's pastoral response) is fairly widely accepted but must be treated with the caution that is necessary in all attempts to use this practice.

³¹ It seems unlikely that Paul had not previously taught them on the subject of Jesus' return, partly because of Paul's reference in 1:10, which we discussed earlier and which suggests that the subject formed part of Paul's earlier preaching, and partly because Paul seems to be dealing not with absolute ignorance on the part of the Thessalonians but with a misunderstanding of information that had been received from Paul leading to false expectations.

confession (“we believe”), and presses those who are wavering back upon it. He then moves them forward from that secure foundation to the matter of less certainty in the minds of the Thessalonians, the future experience of believers who have died.³² Christian hope is thus founded firmly on an accomplished act, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christian hope is also closely bound up with the resurrection of believers, not only their continued existence after death.³³ Hays states it in the following way:

Paul’s answer demonstrates in the clearest possible way that his hope was fixed on the resurrection of the dead rather than immortality of the soul.³⁴

The point of the *παρουσία* hope in this text is “the dead in Christ *will rise* first” (4:16). This important theme is the topic of a significant recent volume in the McMaster New Testament Studies series, edited by Richard Longenecker and entitled *Life in the Face of Death*.³⁵ Several essays in this volume helpfully emphasize the connection in Paul’s thought between the established fact of Jesus’ resurrection and the hope of the resurrection for believers. Thus there is a real sense in which Paul’s hope is already realised to a great extent.

³² The phrase “God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (οὕτως καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ ἰησοῦ ἀξει σὺν αὐτῷ) raises some important questions. The issue of who “those who have fallen asleep” are is in one sense simple. This must refer to Christians. But does the phrase refer to the souls of believers or the bodies of believers? If the former is the case, does that provide confirmation of the exegesis of 3:13 as a reference to believers also? There is a clear parallelism of thought with the previous statement about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Comparison with 1 Cor 6:14 and 2 Cor 4:14 and Rom 8:11 reinforces the view that the reference is to resurrection of bodies, not arrival of disembodied souls. So Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 97-8.

³³ The major study of the resurrection is now N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), which contains a vast amount of relevant information and stimulating discussion.

³⁴ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 22.

³⁵ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998

However, there is a future hope. The description of the return of Jesus that follows is one of the most dramatic portions of the NT. The cry of command, the call of the archangel, the trumpet blast, the meeting in the clouds, are all memorable images that are etched onto the reader's mind. Several commentators have drawn attention to the Jewish associations of these images. Craig Evans identifies two passages in particular, which, in the LXX, reflect the language of 4:16. The first is Exodus 19:16-20, which relates the events surrounding the giving of the law at Sinai. The second is Psalm 47:6 (46:6 in the LXX). The similarities between 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and these OT passages are indications he claims, of "echoes of Scripture"³⁶ which indicate that passages referring to the activity of Yahweh were interpreted at this early stage to refer to the activity of Jesus. Some commentators place the emphasis almost exclusively on the Jewish background to Paul's παρουσία expectations,³⁷ but it seems likely to me that the Thessalonians would have understood Paul to allude to the visit of an important dignitary, an experience many would have been familiar with.³⁸ On such an occasion, the people of the city would go out to meet the approaching procession, and then return to the city in celebration of the arrival of the ruler, as we see in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' triumphal (or 'a-triumphal') entry into Jerusalem (cf. Matt 21:1-11). If this is indeed the background to the passage it raises an interesting question as to the future destination of the Lord's people.

Paul makes it quite plain that believers will meet the Lord in the air. This might well be understood to imply that believers will spend eternity in some form of heavenly suspension, remaining in the air.³⁹ However, Paul does not tell the Thessalonians where the Lord and his people go after having met

³⁶ Evans, in *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* (JSNTS; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 250, alluding to R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

³⁷ So Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia*,

³⁸ So R. H. Gundry, "A Brief Note on 'Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's Use of ΑΠΑΝΘΗΣΙΣ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17'" *BBR* 6 (1996) 39-41.

³⁹ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 169-70, appears to tend towards this view.

in the air, and if Paul's language is intended to reflect the arrival of the king of the earth, then Witherington suggests,

the inference that he intended and that his audience would have taken was that they all would return to earth together.⁴⁰

The primary aspect of hope for the Thessalonians to grasp is that all believers, whether living or dead at the Lord's return, will be with him forever. Once more, personal relationship with Jesus means much more to Paul than does location or other details.

Paul's confidence in this hope is based not simply on faith in the risen Lord but, apparently, on the words of Jesus himself. While some commentators suggest that Paul is thinking of a word given to a Christian prophet,⁴¹ there is no evidence to suggest that Paul intends anything other than a saying spoken by the historical Jesus during his ministry in Palestine.⁴² The fact that the Gospels do not appear to contain such a statement is not fundamentally problematical since the Gospels explicitly declare that they record only some of what Jesus said and did (cf. John 20:30; 21:25). Paul may well have known considerably more of the traditions about Jesus than we do now.

The final words are significant, and will be echoed in the following section also; the *παρουσία* of Jesus is not a matter for theological 'Trivial Pursuit', but a foundation for Christian encouragement. True appreciation of the significance of Jesus' *παρουσία* will have an impact on Christian community.

⁴⁰ Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*, 158.

⁴¹ E.g. Plevnik, 93-4. In his *Theology*, Dunn appears to downplay the role of the Jesus tradition claiming "that can hardly provide the complete explanation" (303). His position is that "It is more likely, then, that the 'word of the Lord' was an inspired utterance or prophecy given to Paul (privately or in the Christian assembly, perhaps drawing on earlier Jesus tradition) as he meditated prayerfully on the Thessalonians' distress" (303).

⁴² So, for example, Marshall, "Parousia", 202.

e) Jesus' return as a challenge to Christian faithfulness

Paul moves directly from the conclusion of the discussion in chapter 4 into a further discussion of the return of Jesus but one with a different purpose in the letter.⁴³ In 5:1-11 he writes,

[1] Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. [2] For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. [3] When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! [4] But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; [5] for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. [6] So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; [7] for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. [8] But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. [9] For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, [10] who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. [11] Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Paul begins this section by saying that he has no need to write it! This is clearly an overstatement, however, because he does feel the need to write to these Christians about the return of Jesus.

⁴³ The phrase "now concerning" indicates that a new topic is to be addressed (cf. the frequent use of the construction in 1 Corinthians, e.g. 7:1; 8:1; 12:1). Dunn (*Theology*, 300, n.33) comments that the construction "indicates a further but obviously related topic, presumably also raised by the Thessalonians for clarification."

Nonetheless, he does so with the conviction that they already have sufficient information about this subject and they must now apply it properly. On this occasion, he does not use *παρουσία* but rather speaks allusively of “the times and seasons” (5:1) and then more clearly of “the day of the Lord” (5:2). The context leaves no doubt that these are references to the return of Jesus, but the application of the prophetic language of the ‘Day of the Lord’ (*Yom Yahweh*; cf. Amos 5:18, 20; Mal 4:5 [MT 3:23]) is still a startling indication of Paul’s high Christology. The complacent refrain “peace and safety” (5:3) is also drawn from the prophetic tradition.⁴⁴ Paul is here standing in the tradition of the prophets, warning God’s people of the reality of judgement to come.

Paul appeals to the knowledge that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night”. This statement echoes the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24:43, and, though it is not an exact quotation of the Gospel account, Paul is almost certainly drawing on the tradition of the life and teaching of Jesus that was well known to him.⁴⁵

Paul plays with the image in order to land a telling application: “you are children of light”. Although the imagery of light and darkness is commonly found in Jewish documents, the specific phrase ‘sons of light’ is not common. It occurs nowhere in the Old Testament, and it is found in Paul’s writings only in Ephesians 5:8. However, the phrase was also favoured by the sectarian community which lived at Qumran. Some of the most interesting Jewish material relating to future expectation is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered during the last fifty years in caves on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. The famous War Scroll (1QM) includes numerous references such as the following:

⁴⁴ Cf. Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11; Ezekiel 13:10.

⁴⁵ So J. D. G. Dunn, “Jesus Tradition in Paul” in *The Christ and the Spirit* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) Vol 1, 176-7. After surveying the Gospels, 2 Peter and Revelation, he writes (177), “The most obvious deduction to draw from all this is that there was a well-known tradition in at least many churches of Jesus having given such a warning and Paul reflects this knowledge in his formulation in 1 Thess. 5:2.”

Then at the time appointed by God, His great excellence shall shine for all the times of e[ternity;] for peace and blessing, glory and joy, and long life for all Sons of Light. On the day when the Kittim fall there shall be a battle and horrible carnage before the God of Israel, for it is a day appointed by Him from ancient times as a battle of annihilation for the Sons of Darkness.⁴⁶

Such references do not prove that Paul copied the language of the scrolls (Paul's words have quite a different tone), but they do make clear that such language was by no means out of place in the letters of a first century Jew. There is no doubt that the phrase relates to Christian holiness. Weima writes,

The metaphors of light and day versus night and darkness, which are common to the literature of the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism, are used here, as in Paul's other letters (especially Rom 13:11-13; also Rom 1:21; 2:19; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 4:6; 6:14; Eph 4:18; 5:8-11; 6:12; Col 1:13), to refer to holy living among believers. Thus the return of Christ, which is also a key theme in the letter, is intimately connected with Paul's preoccupation with holiness throughout 1 Thessalonians.⁴⁷

The point of Paul's reference to the future return of the Lord is clear. Believers should be prepared for the Lord's return, not because they have inside information regarding its timing, but because they are prepared at any given moment to meet him. This can only be achieved by relying entirely on the resources that God himself has provided (the armour of verse 8), and by strengthening and encouraging one another. It is important to grasp the contrast that where modern authors speculate about

⁴⁶ 1QM 1:8-10 cited by Wise, Abegg and Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 152.

⁴⁷ Weima, 100.

times and dates, Paul “knows what he doesn’t know” (!), and promotes faithful vigilance.

Did Paul Expect Jesus’ Return During His Lifetime?

In the light of the Thessalonian correspondence, the question arises as to what Paul’s own expectations of the return of Jesus were. The Thessalonians (or at least some of them) clearly expected Jesus to come during their lifetimes. Was that due to Paul’s own preaching, which he then had to qualify somewhat? This is certainly the view of some authors.⁴⁸ There are two pertinent questions that we need to consider in order to do justice to Paul’s expectations concerning the return of Jesus.

a) To whom did he listen?

Commentators sometimes speak of the ‘Problem of the Delay of the Parousia’ as an important factor in the development of the early Christian church.⁴⁹ They suggest that the first Christians did not expect a lengthy period between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, and his return in glory, and that after many years when it became clear that Jesus was not returning so soon it threw the church into turmoil and resulted in new plans being made.

As I have pointed out already, these commentators are entirely correct that for some Christians there was a ‘Problem of the delay of the Parousia’; the Thessalonians are clear examples of such people. However, it is interesting to note that since 1 Thessalonians is an early letter, the problem appears to have arisen from the earliest days of the Christian communities. The same problem is addressed in 2 Peter 3:4 where Peter refers to the mocking of non-Christians:

⁴⁸ So C. L. Mearns, “Early Eschatological Development in Paul: The Evidence of 1 and 2 Thessalonians” *NTS* 27 (1980-81) 137-57.

⁴⁹ On this issue, refer to the important article by D. E. Aune, “The Significance of the Delay of the Parousia for Early Christianity” in G. F. Hawthorne (ed.), *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 87-109.

Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!

The issue that concerns us, however, is not what non-Christians were saying, nor even what other Christians were expecting, but what Paul was expecting. To ascertain what was in Paul's mind, it is useful to consider the possible influences on him.

One answer is that he listened to Scripture. Paul was steeped in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, and so we should expect that his thought, and even some of his words, would reflect the words of the Scriptures. Thus when we face a text such as Philippians 4:5 ("the Lord is near"), we should not assume that Paul thought that Jesus would certainly come again soon. It is likely that Paul is echoing the words of Psalm 145:18-19 which reads, "the LORD is near to all who call on him" and refer to the close attention of the LORD to his people. That this is the sense of the words in Philippians 4:5 is confirmed by the fact that Paul immediately proceeds to call the Philippians to pray, to "call on" the Lord.⁵⁰

Another important answer to our question is that Paul listened to Jesus. Some people doubt that this is the case. They believe that Paul was not very interested in the earthly Jesus and only concerned himself with the risen Lord.⁵¹ This view is to be rejected, however. We have already seen Paul referring to a 'word of the Lord' and alluding to at least one more of Jesus' sayings, suggesting that he was well acquainted with the life and teaching of the earthly Jesus and that he regarded Jesus' teaching as the authority for his views, including those concerning Jesus' return.⁵²

⁵⁰ So B. Witherington, *Friendship and Finances at Philippi* (Valley Forge: TPI, 1994) 112-3.

⁵¹ Rudolf Bultmann is probably the most famous example, though he is by no means alone in his view.

⁵² David Wenham has gathered many more examples to confirm this view in his book, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

b) What could he have said?

A central phrase in this discussion is found twice in 1 Thessalonians 4: “we who are alive, who are left” (verses 15 and 17). Does this phrase indicate that Paul expected to be alive at the return of Jesus, and that therefore he was incorrect in his belief?⁵³

Ben Witherington has helpfully pointed out the weakness of the arguments that require that Paul confidently expected the return of Jesus in his own lifetime. If we allow that Paul was indeed relying on the words of Jesus, and that he wished to affirm that the return of Jesus *might* be imminent, but that no-one could know the precise time of his return, then we must consider what forms of words he could have used to make that point. If he had said “you who are alive” or “they who are alive” then that would assume that Paul himself had died before Jesus’ return, and Paul is not willing to make that assumption since he does not know if that will be the case or not.⁵⁴ It is true that to say “we who are alive” appears to assume that Paul would still be living at the parousia, but since Paul is alive at the time of writing, and he thinks it perfectly *possible* that Jesus will return before his death, this is the most natural expression to use in order not to make any assumption either way. As Witherington explains,

Preparedness is urged by Paul, and this exhortation is not banal, not because Paul had or could tell his converts the parousia was necessarily imminent, but because he could stress the certainty of Christ’s parousia happening, coupled with its possible imminence (possible,

⁵³ Such is the view of Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 171-2, and Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia*, 81.

⁵⁴ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 172, does not grasp this point as he argues that Paul could have expressed himself differently “had he not wished to include himself among those who would probably survive to the parousia.” Paul has no intention of excluding himself from such a possibility; he simply does not take it for granted.

precisely because Paul did not know the timing of the event).⁵⁵

This open-ended approach to the future return of Jesus finds an interesting parallel in the famous Habakkuk commentary or ‘pesher’ of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which includes the following advice based on Habakkuk 2:3:

“If it tarries, be patient, it will surely come true and not be delayed”

This refers to those loyal ones, obedient to the Law, whose hands will not cease from loyal service even when the Last Days seem long to them, for all the times fixed by God will come about in due course as He ordained that they should by his inscrutable insight.⁵⁶

The sectarian Jews of the Qumran community were quite convinced that the answer to delay in their great vindication was continued faithfulness. In a similar way, Paul urges continued faithfulness so that the believers are ready to meet their longed-for Saviour.

With a slightly different emphasis, Richard Longenecker argues that Paul’s language in the earlier letters may well indicate a stronger conviction that he will meet the Lord before he dies than is found in the later letters. But even if this is granted, that means neither that Paul was certain of Jesus immediate return in the early years, nor that he abandoned his conviction in the Lord’s return in his later years. Longenecker correctly emphasises that,

Whatever shifts of thought, mood, or personal expectation might be postulated, it needs to be

⁵⁵ Witherington, “Transcending Imminence: The Gordian Knot of Pauline Eschatology” in K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliot (eds) *The Reader Must Understand* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997) 178-9.

⁵⁶ 1QpHab 7:9-14 cited by Wise, Abegg and Cook, 119.

emphasized and enunciated clearly that the focus of Paul's teaching regarding the resurrection of believers was always on Christ's Parousia and the resurrection of believers that would then take place. And it is this resurrection message that remains constant in his teaching.⁵⁷

Conclusion

1 Thessalonians is a significant letter in that it is one of the earliest expressions of Christian theology. Raymond E. Brown writes,

it is interesting to imagine being transported back to the year 51 and entering the meeting room at Thessalonica where this letter of the apostle Paul was being read for the first time. Within the opening ten verses one would hear references to God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and to faith, love and hope. That is a remarkable testimony to how quickly ideas that became standard in Christianity were already in place.⁵⁸

I would add that the return of Jesus is present in a very significant way also.⁵⁹ I have argued that, for Paul, the return of Jesus was both a vital theological reality, and an important and effective pastoral tool. Leon Morris writes,

It is worth asking ourselves whether the comparative neglect of the doctrine in much

⁵⁷ Longenecker, R. N., "Is There Development in Paul's Resurrection Thought?" in R. N. Longenecker (ed.) *Life in the Face of Death* (MNTS 3; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 201.

⁵⁸ Brown, *Introduction*, 464-5

⁵⁹ A similar point is made by Paul Ellingworth in "Christology: Synchronic or Diachronic?" in J. B. Green and M. Turner (eds) *Jesus of Nazareth – Lord and Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 489-99, here 492.

modern Christianity has not resulted in great loss.⁶⁰

The answer to this question will now, I hope, be clear. We have seen that Paul makes reference to the return of Jesus in order,

- To remind the Thessalonians of the focus of their Christian hope.
- To present an occasion for rejoicing in Christian relationships.
- To pray for the climax of God's activity in achieving the Thessalonians' holiness.
- To assure the concerned believers of the certainty of resurrection life.
- To challenge the Thessalonians to maintain a life of Christian faithfulness.

If Paul felt it necessary and beneficial to devote so much of this letter to the return of Jesus, have we any right to relegate that theme to the realms of scholars and cranks? The caricature that suggests that those interested in the return of Jesus spend endless hours discussing various forms of millennialism may be true of some, but it is not true of Paul in this vibrant letter. The Thessalonians, though exemplary believers in many ways, required solid instruction on the return of Jesus to bring them further on in their faith. Perhaps this is just what our churches need to give contemporary Christians, such as we are, a vision of hope.

⁶⁰ Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,) 134-5.

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