

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

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### ***Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s Second Letter to the Thessalonians***

(SB\_2Thess\_Introduction)

#### **RECAP OF THE EVENTS SURROUNDING PAUL’S VISIT TO THESSALONICA**

As we observed in our study of 1 Thessalonians, Thessalonica was a port city and a commercial center on the Aegean Sea and situated along the Egnatian Way (Via Egnatia) that linked Rome to Byzantium (Constantinople or modern-day Istanbul, Turkey). Thus, Thessalonica was one of the wealthiest trade centers of the Roman Empire. It was the capital and the largest city of the Macedonian province – about 200,000 people.

Paul first visited Thessalonica during his second missionary journey with Silas and Timothy. The second missionary journey (Acts 15:36-18:22) occurred soon after the Jerusalem Council meeting (Acts 15:6-29).

On the second missionary journey, after crossing the Aegean Sea from Troas, Paul and the missionary party ministered in **Philippi** (Acts 16:11-40). In **Philippi**, Paul and Silas met Lydia, the seller of purple from Thyatira within Asia Minor. They were also imprisoned and miraculously released.

After being released from prison in **Philippi**, they made their way southward to **Thessalonica**. For at least three Sabbath days Paul reasoned in the synagogue with those present, and many believed the gospel (Acts 17:2).

Those who responded to the message of Christ's sufferings and resurrection (Acts 17:3, 7) were Jews (Acts 17:4) and God-fearing proselytes to Judaism. There were also some leading women of the city and many idol worshipping pagans (Acts 17:4-5).

Once the unbelieving Jews in **Thessalonica** realized that Paul was converting some from among their ranks, they reacted very vocally and physically (Acts 17:5-9). They attacked the house of Jason with whom Paul had been lodging. The mob dragged Jason before the magistrates and the magistrates simply charged Jason to keep the peace. The result was that the believers encouraged Paul to move on down the road to **Berea** in an effort to protect him and his party (Acts 17:10).

Paul and his party began their evangelistic work in **Berea** in the synagogue, as was their custom. However, when many of the Jews there believed, the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica came to **Berea** and caused more trouble (Acts 17:10-13). The Berean Christians sent Paul to **Athens**, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:14).

While in **Athens**, Paul requested that Silas and Timothy join him there. However, soon thereafter, Paul sent **Silas to Philippi** and **Timothy to Thessalonica** (1 Thess 3:1-3; Acts 17:15). Later both men returned to Paul when Paul was in **Corinth** working as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3, 5). They brought a gift from the Christians in the Macedonian towns which they had visited (2 Cor 11:9; cf. Phil 4:15).

Timothy's report of conditions in the Thessalonian church led Paul to write his first epistle. Some of the Thessalonians apparently believed that Jesus Christ was about to return momentarily and had consequently given up their jobs and had become disorderly (cf. 1 Thess 4:11; 5:14). Some worried about what had happened to their loved ones who had died before the Lord had returned (1 Thess 4:13, 18).

Believers were experiencing persecution from Gentiles and unbelieving Jews (1 Thess 2:17 3:10), but they continued to believe the truth that Paul had taught them and were eager to see Paul again (1 Thess 3:6-8).

The most significant of all of the doctrinal issues that Paul addresses in 1 & 2 Thessalonians is focused upon eschatological issues. While the idea of an Advent of the Messiah as a victorious conqueror was a constant theme in the Hebrew Scriptures, some of the other eschatological points made by Paul (e.g. the order of the resurrection of the members of the Body of Christ in 4:15-18) were completely new. The reason – God had provided Paul with new revelation regarding the new body of believers of a new, previously unrevealed dispensation known as the Body of Christ. The epistle to the Galatians, most likely the first Pauline epistle, also contains written evidence that Paul was God's chosen instrument to convey the "mystery" doctrines relating to new Gentile-centric dispensation.

#### **KEY VERSES AND CONCEPTS ADDRESSED BY PAUL IN 1 THESSALONIANS**

##### ***Believers Will be Delivered from the "Wrath" to Come (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10)***

For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with 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, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thess 1:9-10)

We observed that this passage is a heavily debated passage by theologians.<sup>1</sup> We also observed that this is more than just a general reference to God's judgment of unbelievers at the end of human history. (That might be true if Paul had made no other eschatological references in 1 Thessalonians). However, references to God's "wrath" toward unbelievers does occur in Scripture and when it occurs such as the trumpet and vial judgments of Revelation 9 and following, there has been direct opposition toward God and alignment with Satan's purpose of keeping God from fulfilling His greater redemptive purpose in history.<sup>2</sup> These unbelievers have rejected the provision of God's love, i.e. His Son, and have become so hardened that they are aligned with Satan.

Since Paul spent considerable space in 1 Thessalonians writing about the period of the Tribulation (1 Thess 4:13-18; 5:1-11), it seems that this is the first reference to that period in the epistle (cf. 1 Thess 2:16; 5:9).

##### ***"Wrath has Come Upon Them [Jewish Unbelievers] to the Uttermost" (1 Thess 2:16)***

14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, 15 who both killed the Lord

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<sup>1</sup> For example, William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of I and II Thessalonians*, p. 57, an amillennialist, believed Paul was speaking generally. However, Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, pp. 40-41, and *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 64, also an amillennialist, wrote that Paul referred to a specific event, the judgment associated with the second coming of Christ. In the amillennial scheme of things this judgment will end the present age. Premillennialists also disagree with one another on this point. John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 17, took Paul's words as a general reference. However, D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 71, also a premillennialist, believed Paul had in mind the Tribulation, which for a pretribulationist is the next great outpouring of God's wrath in history. Source: Dr. Thomas Constable, "Notes on 1 Thessalonians," [www.soniclight.com](http://www.soniclight.com)

<sup>2</sup> For examples of references to this period of wrath, see Matt 3:7; 24:21; Luke 21:23; Rev 6:16, 17; 7:14; 20:11-15.

Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins But wrath has come upon them to the utmost. (1 Thess 2:14-16)

Paul indicates that the unbelieving Jews (a.k.a. elsewhere as the Judaizers) were doing nothing but tipping the scales of God's justice heavily against them. The phrase in verse 16 that "wrath has come upon them to the utmost" is best interpreted in view of the concept of the immanency of the Rapture given the greater eschatological context of much of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. If the Rapture were to have occurred within Paul's day or within the lives of these unbelievers, they would be the subjects of the judgments to be poured out against unbelievers during that period.

Why does Paul use the aorist tense here so as to seem to indicate that the wrath has already come – past tense? I refer to a good explanation provided by the *Expositor's Commentary*.

If the wrath is yet future, why does Paul speak of it as happening in the past (*ephthasen*, "has come")? The best explanation of the aorist tense of the verb comes from comparing the only other NT combinations of *phano epi* ("come upon")-- Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20 -- where Jesus speaks of the kingdom's arrival in comparable terminology. The unique force of this verb connotes "arrival upon the threshold of fulfillment and accessible experience, not the entrance into that experience."<sup>3</sup>

So, Paul's statement that "wrath has come upon them to the utmost" is a way of referencing the fact that if the Rapture were to have occurred in short order, then the Jewish unbelievers were on the threshold of experiencing the judgments that would be poured out upon unbelievers.

### ***The Order of the Resurrection at the Rapture (1 Thess 4:13-18)***

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess 4:13-18)

We must compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 with Matthew 13:41, 49 & 50 and note the distinctions in order to understand the full significance of this passage. Note that in Matthew 13:41, 49 & 50, Jesus indicates that angels attend His coming and perform the task of separating the "wicked from among the righteous and will cast them into the furnace of fire" where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

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<sup>3</sup> Gaebelein, *Expositor's Commentary*.

41 "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, 42 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt 13:41-42)

49 "So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt 13:49-50)

The passages in Matthew are summary statements that highlight significant events within a wider panorama of human history. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent is highlighted as well as the casting of unbelievers into the Lake of Fire – an event that is 1000 years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent.

Paul also alludes to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 when he mentions that "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." However, Paul is also providing new (and previously unrevealed) information specific to the Gentile believers of the Gentile-centric dispensation of the Church Age Body of Christ. Even though they would return with Christ, their resurrection would occur at a different time than the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent and it will have different circumstances associated with it.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, we observed several things concerning the *parousia* which do point to a contrast to other passages that describe the Lord's 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent.

- 1) First, Christ "descends from heaven."
- 2) Second, the meeting between the believer and the Lord occurs "in the air."
- 3) Third, this coming is announced by a great signal from heaven called a "shout" – a command.
- 4) The Greek word is *keleusma* and was used of the cry of a ship's master to his rowers and of a military officer to his soldiers.
- 5) Fourth, the "dead in Christ shall rise first." The prepositional phrase "in Christ" is a technical phrase referring to Church Age – Body of Christ believers.
- 6) Fifth, the living (believers) are said to be "caught up."
- 7) The phrase "caught up" is the passive voice of the verb *harpadzo*.
- 8) *Harpadzo* means to snatch away, seize, or carry off by force.
- 9) In the passive voice, the picture is presented of a sudden forcible seizure by divine agency.
- 10) *Harpadzo* was translated into the Latin Vulgate using a form of the Latin verb *rapio* from which we get the term Rapture.
- 11) Sixth, the living and the dead in Christ will meet the Lord together at this *parousia* described by Paul and the meeting will be in the air.
- 12) Seventh, when so analyzed, Paul's description in these verses are a dramatic contrast to Jesus' teaching concerning another aspect of the *parousia* – i.e. the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent in which believers are left on earth and unbelievers are taken in judgment.

This passage (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17) by itself does not establish the Rapture as a pre-Tribulation event. However, based upon this passage, we see that there is a definite distinction between Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 and Jesus' description in Matthew 13:41, 49 & 50. Paul emphasizes the coming of the Lord Himself; whereas, Jesus taught that angels would attend His Coming and have certain responsibilities. Paul emphasizes that believers of the Church Age Body of Christ will meet the Lord in the air and there is no mention of the earth as that place of meeting. See **Appendix A** to these notes for a pictorial of this distinction.

### ***The “Day of the Lord” Will Be Unexpected by the Unbeliever (1 Thess 5:1-10)***

1 Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. 7 For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. 9 For God has not destined us 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 will live together with Him. (1 Thess 5:1-10)

In this passage, I believe Paul is referring to the fact that one characteristic of unbelievers is that because they reject the light of the Truth regarding the coming “day of the Lord,” it will take them by surprise when it suddenly dawns upon them immediately after the Rapture of the Body of Christ. If they continue to walk in darkness, they will experience the judgments associated with that “day” or period leading up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent of Christ (cf. Matt 24:5-28; Rev 6-19).

Paul does not explicitly state the point that I just made. The reason is that he is writing to believers who have already been taught these things. Therefore, he writes in a manner that alludes to the framework that his readers have already been provided. We are left to determine the details of that framework by piecing together various passages of Scripture – both Pauline and Hebrew (Old Testament) Scripture, not to mention other New Testament writers such as John (Revelation).

### **PAUL’S SECOND LETTER TO THE THESSALONIAN BELIEVERS**

Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians from Corinth. The topics that Paul addresses in the second epistle emerged from situations he alluded to in the first epistle.

Paul’s 2<sup>nd</sup> epistle contains evidence that Paul had recently heard news about current conditions in the Thessalonian church. Most of this information came to him from Timothy most likely – the person who had carried 1 Thessalonians to its recipients and had returned to Paul at Corinth.

Some of the news was good. The majority of the Thessalonians were continuing to grow and to remain faithful to Christ in spite of persecution. Some of the news was not so good. False teaching concerning the day of the Lord had entered the church and was causing confusion and leading some of the Christians to quit their jobs in expectation of the Lord’s return (3:6-15).

Three purposes are evident from the contents of the epistle. First, Paul wrote to encourage the Thessalonian believers to continue to persevere in the face of continuing persecution (1:3-10). Second, he wanted to clarify events preceding the day of the Lord in order to refute the false teaching that the day of the Lord had already come upon them (2:1-12). Finally, he instructed the church how to deal with lazy Christians in their midst (3:6-15).

## APPENDIX A

### *A Dispensational Perspective of the Lord's Coming*

