



1 Thessalonians

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Introduction

A significant portion of the New Testament consists of letters attributed to the apostle Paul. Among these, seven are generally considered to be authentically written by Paul: Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians. Many consider 1 Thessalonians to be Paul's earliest extant letter and, possibly, the earliest book of the New Testament. Though a few date 1 Thessalonians to as early as 40 CE (e.g., Campbell 2014, 220–29), the consensus places it somewhere in the 49–52 CE range, with it likely having been written during Paul's first visit to Corinth. From what we can tell from the letter itself, Paul had previously visited Thessalonica, a major city in the Roman province of Macedonia, but had been forced out against his own desire to remain with them (2:15–18). There is some debate about how long he was present in Thessalonica, with suggestions ranging from three weeks to a few months. The account in Acts 16:6–18:5 mentions that he spoke for three consecutive sabbaths in the synagogue but does not then discuss how much longer he stayed after that. While there is debate about the usefulness of Acts for establishing Pauline chronology, the account of his time in Thessalonica does cohere in a number of ways. In particular, both Acts and 1 Thessalonians testify to opposition from people in the city, which caused him to leave after a shorter time with the Thessalonians than he had anticipated. In the time since he had left, pressing issues had arisen, which he addressed through this letter.

There are a number of [apocalyptic](#) elements within 1 Thessalonians that will be discussed in what follows. These are the eschatological *parousia* or coming of [Christ](#), the day of the Lord, God's wrath and judgment, and end-time resurrection and salvation.

Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians

Eschatology is the major topic in 1 Thessalonians. Each section ends with some sort of eschatological statement about Jesus coming in the future (see 1:9–10, 2:19, 3:13, 4:18, 5:11, 5:23), and the largest section of the letter (4:13–5:11) focuses on themes of death, Jesus's *parousia* ('coming'), resurrection of the dead, judgment, and God's wrath. In fact, as David Luckensmeyer (2009) argues, 'eschatology is *the* key for understanding Paul's pattern of exhortation in First Thessalonians' (6). Everything that Paul urges his audience to do in 1 Thessalonians is directly connected to and motivated by the eschatological

teaching he lays out there.

It is not entirely clear what situation among the Thessalonian believers occasioned this letter; however, there is certainly some issue of fellow believers dying that has caused a crisis of sorts among the rest of the group. This is seen in 4:13: 'we do not want you to be ignorant about those who have fallen asleep [i.e., died], so that you do not grieve like those who have no hope' (unless otherwise noted, all quotes are my own translation). So, there is some concern about the dead that is causing grief among the rest of the community. One suggestion is that they were unaware that there would be a resurrection of the dead because Paul had not had a chance to teach them about it in his short time with them (Barclay 1993, 516-17; Nicholl 2004, 35-38; Foster 2011, 64). Thus, when some among them died before Jesus's return, they had no hope for those who had passed away. Others suggest that the Thessalonians thought the dead would somehow be at a disadvantage when the *parousia* occurred, pointing out that in the flow of the argument in chapter 4, verses 15 and 16 highlight that the living will not 'precede' the dead and that the dead will rise 'first' (Klijn 1982, 67-73). Other Jewish literature from around the time contains statements about those who are alive at the end being in a particularly privileged position, such as 4 Ezra 13:24: 'Understand therefore that those who are left are more blessed than those who have died' (translation from Charlesworth 1983, 552; cf. 4 Ezra 5:41; 6:18-28; 7:27-28; 9:8; Daniel 12:12-13; Psalms of Solomon 17:44). It is possible that the Thessalonians were interacting with that sort of thought at this point; most scholars, however, prefer the first option. In either case, some in the community in Thessalonica had died and their deaths had caused grief and confusion about what would happen to them when Jesus returned. In the letter, Paul seeks to comfort and encourage the Thessalonians in their grief.

To address the Thessalonians' concerns, Paul repeats and expands on the eschatological teaching he touched on in his original visit to them. A key theme throughout 1 Thessalonians is that there are two eschatological fates: salvation for God's people and wrath and destruction for God's enemies. As made clear in 5:9, wrath is the opposite of salvation: 'God has destined us not for *wrath* but for obtaining salvation'. As part of this, 1 Thessalonians also focuses on the theme of appointment or election. God 'appoints' people for salvation rather than wrath (5:9). He 'elects' them (1:4). However, this theme of election also interplays with Paul's moral exhortations to the believers. They are to live worthy lives so that they may stand before God when Jesus comes (3:13). Eschatology motivates exhortation. In 2:12, Paul mentions the kingdom of God, describing his recipients as those whom 'God calls into his kingdom and glory'. Here, the kingdom appears to be a future one, where God's people will share in his glory.

Far more significant for Paul's eschatology than Jesus's death is his resurrection. Though his death is obviously a prerequisite of his resurrection, Paul does not spend time discussing it or its significance in 1 Thessalonians. There is one brief mention of Jesus's death in 5:9-10, where it is said that 'he died for us'. On the other hand, at the beginning of the letter Jesus is designated as the one who was 'raised from the dead' (1:10). More significantly, 4:14 relates Jesus's resurrection to the resurrection of God's people when he returns. This section provides comfort to the grieving Thessalonians, who are worried about the fate of deceased community members. Here Paul only seems to make reference to the resurrection of believers rather than a general resurrection. That does not rule out his belief in a general resurrection, but it at least provides no evidence for it. Because Jesus has been raised, so will anyone else who is 'in him'. Connected to this, the end goal for believers is that they are 'with the Lord forever'. This is a key concept of the letter; it is repeated twice in the main section in 4:18 and 5:11. It serves to comfort the grieving Thessalonians, letting them know that both they and their deceased community members will be fully united with [Christ](#) in

the end.

Parousia

There are a number of important terms that Paul uses in 1 Thessalonians. For example, Paul uses the Greek terminology of *parousia* throughout most of the sections of the letter. *Parousia* often simply means 'presence' or 'arrival', as it does elsewhere in Paul's letters (1 Corinthians 16:17; 2 Corinthians 7:6,7; 10:10; Philippians 1:26; 2:12). However, it also takes on a more technical meaning in the New Testament when used in eschatological contexts to refer to the coming or return of Jesus (see Matthew 24:27,37,39—'the coming of the son of Man'—and James 5:8—'the coming of the Lord is near'). The only other place Paul uses *parousia* with an eschatological meaning is 1 Corinthians 15:23 ('at his [Christ's] coming'), a parallel passage in many ways to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. The repeated use of *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians is, therefore, significant and striking.

Each of the occurrences in 1 Thessalonians refers to a future moment when Jesus will come—2:19: 'what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at *his coming*?'; 3:13: 'blameless before our God and Father at *the coming* of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones'; 4:15: 'we who remain at *the coming* of the Lord'; 5:23: 'blameless at *the coming* of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Additionally, though not using the language of *parousia*, 1:10 clearly talks about the same topic, stating that the Thessalonians are waiting 'for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath'. Here, Jesus is portrayed as an intermediary between those who wait for him and God's wrath—a wrath that will be poured out at some point in the future. Each of these points to a future moment in time when Jesus comes and things change.

There are hints of judgment scenes in most of these statements about the *parousia*. In 2:19-20, Paul says that the Thessalonians will stand as witnesses attesting to his ministry before Jesus at the *parousia*. In 3:13, the judgment seems to lie with God, before whom Paul hopes the Thessalonians will be blameless at the *parousia*. In 5:23, again, Paul prays they are blameless at the *parousia*. Throughout the letter, holiness/blamelessness is tied up with being able to stand before God/Jesus at the moment of Jesus's coming. At the same time, 5:23-24 makes clear that God will enable this. Though Paul does not clearly present final judgment scenes here, it is safe to imply that he has in mind an end-time judgment that occurs at the moment that Jesus comes and that this sits in the background of his moral exhortations to his audience.

The most extensive description of the *parousia* in the letter occurs in 4:13-18: Jesus will descend from heaven, and his descent will be accompanied by trumpets and shouts of archangels. When he descends, the dead will be resurrected, then the living and the resurrected together will ascend to be with Jesus in the air. However, there is significant debate over the origins of the imagery Paul uses in 4:13-18 to describe Jesus's arrival and its implications. Some scholars argue for a solely Jewish background, with the Sinai theophany or 'coming of God' traditions serving as the model (particularly Exodus 19:10-18; Dupont 1952, 68-69). Clouds feature prominently in such texts, as do trumpets and often angels. In these scenes, God descends to meet with his people, similarly to in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Even if not directly influenced by Exodus 19, 'coming of God' and "day of the Lord" texts in the Jewish scriptures draw on and develop this imagery of God coming to his people (Plevnik [1997] 2014, 10). Paul quite likely interacts with

these [Jewish apocalyptic texts](#) to some extent in his conception of Jesus's *parousia*. For example, 3:13 likely draws on Zechariah 14:5, a "day of the Lord" text, referring to the angels who will accompany Jesus at his *parousia*, so he was certainly aware of these traditions.

On the other hand, many strongly argue for a Hellenistic background, pointing to the practice of formal receptions when an emperor or other dignitary would visit a city (Deissmann 1910, 372–78; Peterson 1930). On these occasions, the residents would go outside the city to meet the important visitor and accompany them back into the city. So, on this interpretation, believers are raised up to meet Jesus in the air as a sort of welcoming committee but then accompany him back to the earth. The Greek word *apantesis* (used in 4:17) is also found in accounts of these formal receptions, though it is a common word throughout the Greek-language Jewish scriptures to indicate a meeting between people, which may suggest it did not function as a technical term. At the same time, the use of both *parousia* and *apantesis* in this section may provide stronger evidence for a formal reception background than use of either on its own.

One function of [apocalyptic](#) literature can be to make a veiled critique of the ruling power. Thus, some would see an intentional anti-imperial positioning of Jesus here over the emperor (Harrison 2002, 92–93; 2011, 62), with Paul proclaiming that the real king is coming back through the imagery of imperial formal receptions. Some further point to 5:3 as intentionally quoting imperial propaganda about peace and security in order to undermine the claims of imperial Rome and show that its end is destruction, despite how powerful it currently seems. Paul does not seem particularly concerned with the impact of the imperial rulers on the community, so I think it unlikely he was engaging in intentional anti-imperialism. However, the subjugation of worldly rulers is a logical outworking of Paul's eschatology, for ultimately God is presented as the ruler and judge of all. Whatever influence one sees behind the images here (and I think a combination of both theophany and imperial influences is likely), the main point is clear: whether dead or alive, when Jesus comes believers will be fully united with him. No enemy of God will escape destruction, and everyone who belongs to God will be saved in the end.

All of this imagery is future oriented, pointing to a yet-to-come moment when the status quo is interrupted and overturned. This raises questions about how far in the future these events will take place. In 4:15, Paul contrasts the dead with 'we who are alive, who remain', which many have been taken to mean Paul thought he would still be alive at the *parousia*. They would see here a belief in an imminent *parousia*, which is about to happen, and would say that Paul, in the end, was grossly mistaken about the timing of the event. Others argue that this does not mean Paul was necessarily wrong, simply that at the time of writing he was imagining himself in the group of 'the living', for that was the group he belonged to at that moment. Whether or not he thought Jesus was to return in the immediate future, Paul urges his audience that they must be prepared and ready to meet the Lord.

Rapture Theology

Within later theological thought, 1 Thessalonians 4:17 played a key role in the development of Rapture theology, an eschatological teaching that claims believers will be snatched off the earth to be with [Christ](#), while unbelievers will face tribulations before the *parousia* and a thousand-year reign of Christ and believers on earth. The Latin word *rapio*, which in the Latin Vulgate's translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17

translates the Greek *harpazo* ('snatch up'), is the etymological starting point for the term 'Rapture'. In addition to 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, Rapture theology is heavily influenced by the descriptions in Matthew 24 and Revelation 20:1–6. The portrayal in Matthew 24:40–41, where two men are in a field and one is taken while the other is left, has particularly influenced the view of God's people being suddenly plucked out of the world before the eschatological tribulations begin. Dispensationalist readings of 1 Thessalonians likewise understand the description of the *parousia* in 4:13–18 as occurring before the tribulations described in 5:1–11, supporting a pretribulationist/premillennial interpretation. Rapture theology did not become popular until the early nineteenth century, when John Nelson Darby (1800–82), a Plymouth Brethren leader, taught it as part of his dispensationalist theology, focusing on premillennial eschatology. In Darby's view, the current dispensation started with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE and will last until the 'Rapture' of believers at Jesus's *parousia* (Thiselton 2011, 144). Similar views were also disseminated through the *Scofield Reference Bible* alongside teaching coming out of the Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary in the early twentieth century (Thiselton 2011, 143–45; Gupta 2019, 165). Before Darby, commentators did not discuss a 'Rapture' theology such as is found in modern eschatological discussions and, as explored above, there are a number of other plausible readings of these passages.

The Day of the Lord

The other important eschatological term Paul uses in 1 Thessalonians is 'the day of the Lord', in 5:2. This language clearly draws on the Hebrew [prophets](#) phrase 'day of YHWH' (see e.g. Amos 5:18,20; Isaiah 2:12; 13:6; Ezekiel 7:10; Joel 1:15; Obadiah 15). Elsewhere in the New Testament the phrase appears in Acts 2:20 (which is quoting the Old Greek version of Joel 3:4) and in 2 Peter 3:10 (which is also in the context of thief imagery, discussed below). In Paul's use of it here, it is not immediately clear whether he views it as the day of God or the day of Jesus. Paul's preferred term for Jesus is *kyrios*, 'Lord', so it is natural to read the same here; at the same time, he may simply be adopting the [prophetic](#) term, with the reference remaining God. A similar phrase occurs in 1 Corinthians 5:5 ('so that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord'), where it is similarly ambiguous, though immediately preceding this Jesus is designated as Lord. In 1 Corinthians 1:8 and 2 Corinthians 1:14, Paul writes about 'the day of our Lord Jesus'. In Philippians 1:6,10 and 2:16 it is 'the day of Christ [Jesus]'. Given the use of this phrasing in other eschatological contexts with reference to Jesus, it is best to understand it in 1 Thessalonians as 'the day of the Lord Jesus' as well.

There are further questions about whether the day of the Lord is to be fully equated with the *parousia*. Barclay, for example, observes, 'when Paul discusses the visible descent of [Christ](#) from heaven in 4:13–18 he talks of the *parousia* of Christ rather than "the day of the Lord," while in 5:1–11 he associates "the day of the Lord" particularly with the sudden destruction of unbelievers (5:2–3)', though Barclay does not argue that these are in fact distinct events (1993, 527). Some, however, do think that Paul speaks of two separate days, one day of salvation for believers (the *parousia*) and one day of wrath for unbelievers (the day of the Lord) (see Holland 1988, 104). In the Hebrew prophets, the day of the Lord is sometimes solely a day of wrath (Isaiah 13:9; Ezekiel 30:3), though in the post-exilic [prophets](#) the focus shifts to include salvation for God's people and becomes more of an eschatological hope (Zechariah 14:1–21; Old Greek version of Malachi 3:19–20). Thus, in these later writings salvation and wrath both happen in the same event, just to different groups. This same nuance is picked up in Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians 5, and, while he may use *parousia* to speak specifically about the 'coming' aspect of the event, 'day of the

Lord' covers the whole thing. It is also significant that in the rest of his letters Paul's preferred term for this event is 'day of the Lord'.

In his description of the day of the Lord and its impact on people, Paul reverts to more obviously [apocalyptic language](#). Throughout chapter 5, he contrasts believers with unbelievers by calling the first group 'sons of light' and 'sons of day' (5:5,8) and describing the second group as belonging to darkness and night. The common dualism of light and dark is also found in other apocalyptic and eschatological texts (e.g. 1QM from the Dead Sea Scrolls contrasts the 'sons of light' with the 'sons of darkness'). Luke 16:8 and John 12:35–36 also describe believers as 'sons of light' and Ephesians 5:8 calls them 'children of light'. The term 'sons of day' does not have a direct parallel in the literature but is clearly conceptually related to 'sons of light'. The dualism again highlights that there are two outcomes on this day of the Lord: either one receives salvation (5:9) or one is destroyed by God's wrath (5:3).

In 5:2 Paul employs a common early Christian metaphor for the day of the Lord: it will come 'like a thief in the night' (cf. Matthew 24:42–44; Luke 12:39–40; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3). The image evokes an unexpected and disastrous appearance. The implication of the image here is that if one is unprepared, the day of the Lord will have painful consequences—just as if a thief were to gain entrance to an unguarded house. However, those who continue to keep watch, who are prepared, will experience salvation on that day. The suddenness of this imagery leads many to claim Paul is here teaching an imminent *parousia*. Within this section, Paul also employs the metaphor of labour pains, imagery that is common in other Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts. For example, Isaiah 13:6–9 also describes the day of the Lord as a day of ruin and wrath, using the same language of birth pangs and a woman in labour (cf. Revelation 12:2). Like the thief metaphor, this imagery is also meant to evoke suddenness, giving the picture of an unstoppable event.

While this language conveys suddenness, Paul does not explicitly here say the day of the Lord is imminent, if by imminence we mean 'immediately about to happen'. His focus is more on outcome—whether the Thessalonians will be prepared to receive salvation or will be found lacking on that day. However, if taken together with the fact that he assumes he will be in the group of people who are still alive when Jesus comes and that he describes the Thessalonian believers as those who wait for Jesus's salvation, it does seem likely that Paul expects the day of the Lord in the not-too-distant future. Paul understands this day as a cataclysmic event that overturns the current state of the world and brings punishment to God's enemies and salvation to his people.

Popular Reception

The first letter to the Thessalonians has certainly contributed to wider conceptions about [apocalypticism](#) and eschatology, particularly in the realm of dispensationalist theology and Christian fiction in the United States. The growth of dispensationalist thought in the United States started to become more mainstream in the mid-twentieth century, especially as fictional portrayals began to be produced. For example, in the 1970s, there was a mildly popular Christian film series called *A Thief in the Night*, which dealt with the eschatological topics of the Rapture and the tribulation from a pre-tribulationist, dispensationalist perspective. The 'thief in the night' language is clearly from the tradition found in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 (the other parallel texts mentioned above do not contain the exact same phrasing 'in the night'). Though not as

popular as the works discussed below, this series widened the influence of dispensationalist eschatology.

Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*—the best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s—had a significant impact on the reception of eschatological and apocalyptic biblical books. It teaches a premillennial, dispensationalist eschatology, further developing 'Rapture theology' based on 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Lindsey suggested that apocalyptic scenes from Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation were soon to occur in the 1980s, promoting a literalist interpretation of them. The reason he suggested the 1980s was because he understood that as a generation (forty years according to him) after the founding of the Jewish state in 1948. Despite many predictions failing to occur, Lindsey's work influenced a large segment of American Christianity with the presentation of Rapture theology. There was even a film version of the book that was narrated by Orson Welles.

Both the film series and *The Late Great Planet Earth* influenced the best-selling *Left Behind* book series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (see McAlister 2003), which in turn helped to popularize dispensationalist, premillennial/pretribulational eschatology. The books drew on 1 Thessalonians (alongside Revelation, Daniel, and Ezekiel) for their portrayal of the Rapture. For example, the first book opens on the day of the Rapture with the sudden disappearance of a number of people on a flight; the protagonists discover that millions of people across the world have disappeared in the same manner and they eventually connect this to the idea of the 'Rapture'. The *Left Behind* books set the eschatological agenda for many evangelicals, meaning that Rapture theology now holds a wide appeal. The views were spread further through the film adaptations of the novels, including the 2014 reboot starring Nicholas Cage. Despite having little support among most scholars, Rapture theology continues to be extremely popular among many Christians and is ingrained in wider conceptions of the end times.

Conclusion

The first letter to the Thessalonians is a thoroughly eschatological book, filled with [apocalyptic](#) elements surrounding its discussion of Jesus's *parousia* and the outpouring of God's wrath. These elements serve to comfort a grieving community, to give them hope in the face of death, and to direct their gaze to their end goal. The first letter to the Thessalonians presents a future-oriented eschatology in which believers wait for the coming of their Lord, who will save them from God's wrath. This has present implications for them—they are to live holy and watchful lives as they wait for Jesus's appearance—but ultimately salvation and judgment are both future occurrences for Paul. Additionally, 1 Thessalonians contributed in a small but significant way to the development of dispensationalist Rapture theology—a conception of eschatology that has achieved wide recognition in popular culture.

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