

An Eschatological Understanding from the Apostle Paul's letters to the Church in Thessalonica

Background

The Apostle Paul clearly understood the purifying hope afforded to the believer who has a proper understanding of eschatology, or the study of last things. In both of his letters to the young church in Thessalonica, Paul emphasized a hope rooted in Christ's second coming to include vindicating eternal judgment for all unbelievers. The letters make it clear that this was not the first time that Paul had discussed such future events with this young but influential church. Paul had already discussed "the times and the seasons" of future judgment among them during his first and brief church-planting visit with them (1 Thess. 5:1; 2 Thess. 2:5). Considering that Paul was only among the Thessalonians for a very short time before persecution forced him to move on (Acts 17:1-9), it is significant to realize that Paul prioritized eschatology to be included in the content of his formal teaching among these young believers. Certainly Paul understood that "everyone who has this hope fixed on Him [Christ] purifies himself, just as He [Christ] is pure" (1 John 3:3). Paul realized that the church's understanding of eschatology was a critical component that affected how they lived and interpreted their life circumstances.

In 1 Thessalonians, the eschatological content answers two significant questions. First Paul addresses the death of believers and their participation in the rapture of the church. In this first epistle Paul clarifies the hope that believers have for those who die in Christ. He emphasizes the comfort and hope that a proper view of the rapture gives to the church. Secondly, he answers questions related to the coming day of the Lord. Some of the young believers had been falsely convinced that the day of the Lord had already occurred, and Paul writes to clarify that the day of the Lord is yet future, although imminent. He goes on to clarify the differences between how believers and unbelievers should await Christ's return and therewith encourages and builds up the new believers in Thessalonica.

Eschatology is even a more significant subject in 2 Thessalonians. The tone of the apostle in this second correspondence expresses his strong desire to establish a correct understanding of "the end times" among these persecuted young believers in the capital city of Macedonia. The church needed encouragement to persevere a little longer. Persecution had come, and evidently someone had sent a letter in Paul's name indicating that they were in the day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:2). Paul thus writes to assure them that believers will not be involved in the day of the Lord and to clarify points which will evidence the arrival of God's wrath. Since these evidences have not yet been realized, the church can rest assured that the day of the Lord has not yet begun. He goes on to warn those who were becoming lax and who were not heeding his previous exhortation (1 Thess. 4:12). The apostle closes his second letter by encouraging the church to be gainfully employed as they await Christ's return, emphasizing again how a right understanding of eschatology promotes holiness and love among the children of God.

Paul's emphasis upon "last things" in his limited interactions to the Thessalonians should inspire the contemporary church to better understand and apply biblical revelation related to eschatology. Some believe that the eschatological matters in first and second Thessalonians are contradictory; however belief in the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture prevents this conclusion. Certainly the Holy Spirit did not contradict himself when He breathed out the

various scriptures. The student of the biblical text must seek an interpretation that properly reflects each text's literal, grammatical, and historical reality, while maintaining an internal correspondence with all other inspired texts. Therefore, this paper attempts to use the literal, grammatical, and historical hermeneutic to harmonize all of Paul's eschatological teachings from both first and second Thessalonians into one cohesive system. Certainly if the system presented below is consistent with the biblical text, it will promote holiness, comfort, and loving deeds in all those who are the children of God.

1 Thessalonians 4:18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Understanding Key Terminology

Before examining the biblical text, it is important to understand that certain terminology in the eschatological realm is very broad and descriptive, rather than precise and definitive. Paul uses sweeping and inclusive terms a variety of ways throughout his discussion of "last things." Unnecessary confusion from these common terms can be avoided by those who are aware of such distinctions. To miss the distinctive usages of these terms would lead to false conclusions and wayward application. This section attempts to highlight such terminology and accordingly clarify the expositional discussion which is to follow.

The Day of the Lord

Similar to Paul's broad use of "times and seasons" in 1 Thess. 5:1, the day of the Lord is not limited to only a literal 24-hour period. Rather the usage of ἡμέρα refers to an extended period of time characterized by revelation and enlightenment. Throughout these epistles the future day of the Lord is a period of time contrasted against the present age of darkness. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 this metaphorical understanding lays the groundwork for the more general concept of "daylight" in the following verses 5 and 8.

In 2 Thessalonians this metaphoric understanding of the "day of the Lord" remains consistent. In chapter one, verse 10 ἡμέρα refers to the παρούσια or unveiling of Christ at the beginning of the tribulation. In 2 Thessalonians 2:2 the ἡμέρα includes both the ἀποστασία and the ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας of verse 3, therefore again using a broad temporal description which includes a series of non-simultaneous events. In other words, the arrival of the apostasy and the man of lawlessness are two different events that merely mark the beginning of the time biblically referred to as "the day of the Lord."

A careful grammatical review of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 provides adequate proof that the apostasy and man of lawlessness compose the early stages of the day of the Lord *after* it has already begun. The apodosis of the conditional sentence is missing in verse 2:3. Nearly all modern translations have supposed a future completion to this thought, thereby suggesting that the day of the Lord *will not come* unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed. However there is sufficient contextual evidence to warrant the syntactical use of the verb in the present intensive tense instead of the future. Grammatically the apodosis of the New Testament ἐάν-subjunctive frequently carries a present or perfect intensive tense, especially where supported by context. Here, verse 2:2 is in the present intensive sense: "the day of the Lord is present" and its sense naturally carries into the next verse. Parallel syntactical constructions as found in John 7:51, Matthew 12:29, Mark 3:27, and Romans 15:24 also supply convincing proof that the action of such conditional clauses is included in the chronological sequence of the apodosis, and does not precede it. Furthermore, in these parallel constructions

the *πρῶτον* consistently indicates the priority of the former member of the compound predicate to the latter predicate – not suggesting priority of the former member to the apodosis. Applying this syntactical understanding back to 2 Thessalonians 2:3 would mean that the apostasy comes prior to the revelation of the man of lawlessness, but not prior to the day of the Lord.

Understanding the missing main clause of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 in the present sense hence renders the translation, “The day of the Lord is not present unless first in sequence within that day there has come the apostasy and following this apostasy’s beginning the revealing of the man of lawlessness.” This interpretation is grammatically consistent while avoiding the erroneous understanding of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 which teaches certain precursors or signals prior to the arrival of the day of the Lord in contradiction to the day of the Lord coming “like a thief” as taught in 1 Thessalonians 5:2. This understanding also maintains the contextual emphasis of imminence which pervades both epistles. Therefore a careful grammatical analysis of the term “day of the Lord” notes that it must conceptually include both the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness, maintaining the metaphoric understanding of *ἡμέρα* referring to an extended and future time of revelation and enlightenment.

Finally it is helpful to consider that other inspired texts maintain this broad and metaphoric understanding of the day of the Lord. Cross referencing Matthew 24:29-31 with 2 Thessalonians 1:10 suggests that the rapture is one portion of the time known as “the day of the Lord.” Certainly 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4 place wrath, tribulation, and “sudden destruction” within the scope of this metaphoric day as well. And 2 Thessalonians 1:10 makes it clear that the day of the Lord includes the start of the millennial reign, when Christ comes to receive glory in his saints. Clearly then the day of the Lord should be understood as an overarching term that describes a different season than the present, a time to include the rapture of the church, great apostasy, the revelation of the man of perdition, great tribulation, Christ’s second coming, and the millennial reign. (See figure 1.)

The Revelation of the Lord Jesus from Heaven

The ἀποκαλύψει τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ in 2 Thessalonians 1:7 must also be properly understood before proceeding to the following expositional discussion. Ἀποκαλύψει is one of several words that Paul uses for the coming of Christ. The emphasis is upon the future unveiling of Christ since now in the present age He is hidden (1 Peter 1:8). The surrounding context in verses 5-10 flesh out what the apostle Paul means by this term and help us understand its use in a more general and inclusive sense.

Two audiences of the revelation are introduced and compared here. For those unbelievers who are oppressing the saints, the revelation of Christ means judgment and vengeance (2 Thessalonians 1:6, 8, and 9). Paul uses the strong words of ...ἐν πυρὶ φλογός, διδόντος ἐκδίκησιν and ...δίκην τίσουσιν ὄλεθρον to graphically portray the ruin and destruction of those who do not know God and who are not obeying His gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). This devastating righteous judgment will accompany the revelation of Christ, as mentioned in Luke 21:22. Yet in stark contrast the revelation of Christ brings ἄνεσιν, or relief, to the oppressed believers (2 Thessalonians 1:7). This ἄνεσιν corresponds to the meeting in the air and being “with the Lord” as spoken of in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

Such contrasting results of the ἀποκαλύψει τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ requires that the ἀποκαλύψει reflects a span of time that is long enough to include the rapture of the church, the tribulation of the unbelievers, and the second coming of Christ. First, in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, the preposition ἀπο followed by the ablative means “off” or “away from”,

thereby suggesting that the revelation of Jesus Christ involves his departure from heaven to rapture His believing church. This directly relates to primary rapture passage in 1 Thessalonians 4 where “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God” (4:16). Clearly the purpose of 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 is to supply an incentive for the readers to persevere a little longer in their persecutions. The incentive is the prospect of immediate rest in conjunction with “the revelation of the Lord Jesus.” If a period of more severe persecution such as will occupy the tribulation period must first intervene, there is no incentive for the believers in Thessalonica at all. In fact, most believers will not survive this end-time ordeal through which the followers of Christ must pass. Therefore it is necessary to understand the revelation of Christ to include in its initial stages the rapture of the church, where they will accompany the Lord back to heaven for initial judgment at the Bema seat of Christ where they will dwell in His presence until the earthly tribulation is complete.

Second, since 2 Thessalonians 1:6 describes as part of the ἀποκαλύψει a tribulation on earth that will begin simultaneously with the initiation of rest for the saints in the air. The θλίψιν must entail an elapsed period of time of carrying out vengeance that is fitting with its title of tribulation. Furthermore, the present tense of the διδόντος, as a component of Christ’s revelation in 1:8, indicates a prolonged punitive dealing with God’s enemies. However the sense of the δίκην τίσουσιν ὄλεθρον in 1:9 suggests more of a distinctively final punishment that, contrary to the διδόντος ἐκδίκησιν will never end. The ἀποκαλύψει therefore must be long enough to include the full sense of its judgmental components as described in this passage. It is clear from 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 that both the initial tribulation period and the final eternal punishment of unbelievers are to be understood as a part of the revelation of Christ.

Finally, the ἀποκαλύψει refers to the second coming of Christ as He returns to earth with His saints to receive glory and wonder from all men and issue eternal destruction (ὄλεθρον) upon all who do not believe. This revelation of Christ’s glory to the world will be preceded by a revelation of God’s righteous judgment on the world (Romans 2:5), but will now culminate in the entrance of the millennial kingdom and the reign of Christ and His saints upon the earth (1 Peter 4:13). Here the angels will descend with Christ in judgment, and second coming of Christ to earth will be completed (1 Corinthians 1:7-8).

Therefore we understand the revelation of Jesus Christ to be a broad term which encompasses two distinct comings of Christ, including both the rapture and his second coming to reign in the millennial kingdom. The whole series of happenings is encompassed in ἀποκαλύψει. (See figure 1.)

The Coming of the Lord Jesus

Similar to the durative concept of ἀποκαλύψει, Paul’s frequent usage of παρουσία throughout the instructive letters takes on a broader and more durative meaning. It is virtually impossible to explain the variety of relationships belonging to παρουσία in these epistles if it is understood only as a single event. Simply the meaning of the word suggests a longer duration.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1 Paul places the gathering together of the saints in rapture, ἐπισυναγωγῆς, within the larger context of the παρουσία. This event begins the day of the Lord, but does not include all the possible meanings of the παρουσία. In 1 Thessalonians 3:13 and 2 Thessalonians 2:8 the παρουσία seems to clearly refer to Christ’s second coming to earth with his saints. However if Paul intended for the παρουσία to only be simultaneous with Christ’s return to earth after the tribulation, the false claim that the day of the Lord was already present in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 could have hardly alarmed these Christians. The fact that the

claim about the day of the Lord being present had been made and was indeed unsettling to this church suggests that Paul had not taught a one-phase, short-term παρουσία, but rather a παρουσία that accommodated both his gathering together of the saints and his second coming to rule and judge the lawless one and his unbelieving hosts. (See figure 1.)

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Imminent Hope for Believers

Eschatology in the Thessalonians' epistles repeatedly emphasizes imminence. There are no necessary precursors to the παρουσία τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Paul makes clear that the day of the Lord, as initialized by the rapture and forthcoming rest for the believers could arrive at any time without warning. While he is careful to assure the fainthearted that they and their deceased brethren will not miss out on this event (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), he writes to urge them to be sober and watchful as they await his imminent return (1 Thessalonians 1:10, 5:6).

Paul makes it vividly clear that the glorious hope for the Thessalonians is the coming rapture where all the saints, both alive and dead, will be gathered together to meet the Lord in the air to be forever with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17; 2 Thessalonians 2:1). It is clear from 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9 that this rapture will precede the wrath which is to come, thereby giving hope to the persecuted church that a time of vindication and relief is coming. As already discussed above, this rapture actually starts the day of the Lord (Matthew 24:29-31), and is therefore without prerequisite or precursor for the believer who is walking in the day (1 Thessalonians 5:4-5). The day will come unexpectedly and suddenly, just like a thief comes (1 Thessalonians 5:2), and therefore requires that believers are always walking in the power of the Spirit so that they will not be surprised by his sudden arrival (Matthew 24:42-44). Imminent rest awaits believers at the arrival of the rapture (2 Thessalonians 1:7), and therein lies the hope. At any moment believers could be caught up in the air to meet the Lord and undergo the judgment of their believing works at Christ's Bema seat in order to receive his rewards (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). The understanding of Christ's imminent return is thus a great and purifying hope for the believer as he trusts God to keep him entirely blameless until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Imminent Wrath for Unbelievers

Since the rapture of the church initializes the day of the Lord, we must understand that the wrath-filled day of the Lord is also an imminent reality for all unbelievers. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 teaches that the wrath is coming, and verse three of chapter five stresses the sudden destruction that will fall upon those who are living in their own selfish pursuits.

Clearly there are no precursors yet to be fulfilled before the wrathful day of the Lord begins. Already even now the wrath is present in a positional and judicial sense (1

Thessalonians 2:16; 2 Thessalonians 2:7), but it will not yet be fully experienced until the restrainer of the Holy Spirit is taken out of the way and wickedness is fully realized (2 Thessalonians 2:6). The arrival of such wrath will be like the lightning flashing across the sky (Matthew 24:27), without prior warning or second chance. God in His incomprehensible providence will have sovereignly orchestrated the full entrance of the Gentiles (Romans 11:25), the increasing wickedness of all mankind (Matthew 24:12; 2 Timothy 3:13), and the global preaching of the gospel (Matthew 24:14), so that all will be without excuse on that final day of judgment (Romans 1:20). The entrance of that apocalyptic wrath will bring the apostasy and then the manifestation of the lawlessness one who will set himself up to be worshiped by the wrath-frenzied population (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Such wrath is certainly sobering, and must cause the reader to ponder the object of their salvation as they consider its imminent presence.

2 Thessalonians 2:13 But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

Christ's Second Coming to Reign

The Thessalonians certainly understood that Christ was coming back to reign on the earth. From the Jewish traditions of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants to the teachings of Christ Himself there was a certain expectation of the Messiah's earthly and eternal kingdom. Paul taught much about Christ's coming back to reign and appealed directly to this coming kingdom as a motivation for holy living (1 Thessalonians 2:12; 3:13). Specifically in 2 Thessalonians 1:5, Paul speaks of the Thessalonians' current persecutions and sufferings as preparing them for the glory soon to be revealed in the Kingdom of Christ. This millennial kingdom is portrayed as a kingdom of glory that is established by Christ Himself as He abolishes the lawless and receives the glory and the wonder that He alone is due (2 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

There has been some question as to who comes to establish the millennial kingdom with Christ. Who are "all the holy ones" who accompany Christ to setup the kingdom in 1 Thessalonians 3:13? In 2 Thessalonians 1:7 it says that the Lord Jesus will come "from heaven with angels of his power" and Matthew 25:31 says that angels will come with him to establish his throne. However τῶν ἁγίων consistently refers to redeemed men in the Pauline epistles. Furthermore, the elect are elsewhere associated with Christ's return in 2 Thessalonians 1:10 and Matthew 24:31. Also in the context of 1 Thessalonians 3:13, men are the objects of evaluation in God's presence at the time described herein. Therefore it seems best to conclude that Christ will be attended by the previously raptured saints when he comes back to establish his earthly kingdom in Jerusalem, and it is these saints who will rule with Christ for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:4-6).

Of course part of Christ's rule on the earth will include the judgment of the lawless and apostate. 1 Thessalonians 2:16 teaches that the wrath will come upon all the ungodly unto completion, or perfect destruction. The judgment of God will be announced by the sounding of a trumpet, and no one shall be able to escape his wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:3). In a penetrating flame of fire, vengeance will be meted towards those who do not obey the gospel or know the Christ as Savior (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). Their knowledge of Jesus Christ will forevermore be limited to his just judgment, and the glorious strength of his wrath. The lawless son of perdition himself will be destroyed by the Word of God and the holy presence of Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:8). And Satan himself will be bound and cast into the bottomless pit for the duration of the

Millennial Kingdom on the earth (Revelation 20:1-5). Surely Christ's rule will be a glorious reality that all believers long to experience for the glory of God's name.

Revelation 22:20-21 He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

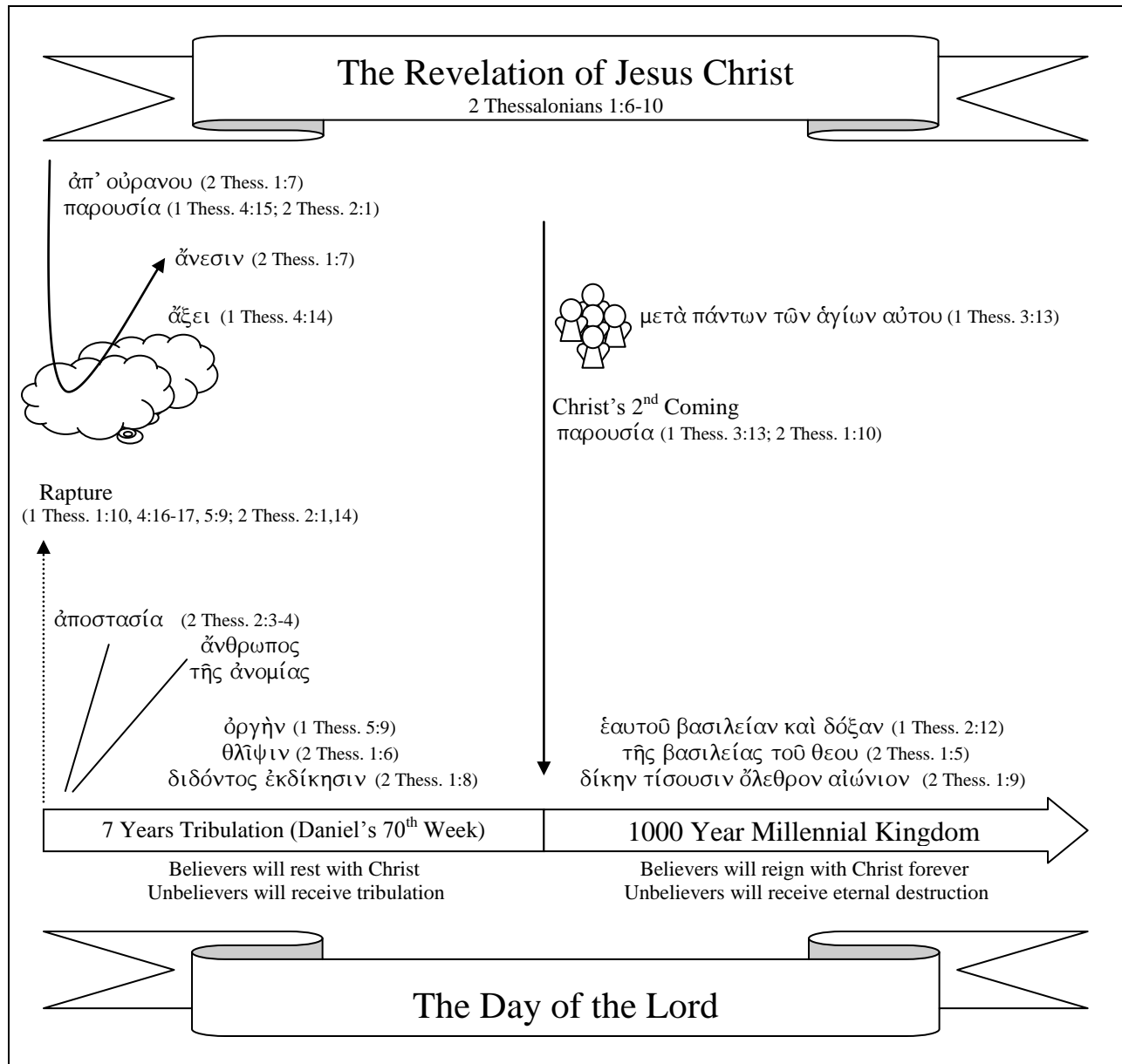


Figure 1.