

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Homeland Insecurity: The Spiritual Lust for an Escape Clause

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In perilous times religious people look to their religion for succor and reassurance that things, though they now appear to be going all wrong, will in the end turn out all right. This desire or anxiety for something more than just assurance, for some kind of theological guarantee of eternal security or at least eternal safety from the most outrageous forms of the slings and arrows of fortune, is understandable in a world full of trouble and tribulation. Two of the theological ways these sorts of anxieties have been manifested and dealt with in the Protestant movement have been through the emphasis on eternal security when it comes to the matter of salvation proper and timely safety when the “final tribulation” comes, which some of the faithful expect at the end time. This essay focuses on the second of these artful attempts to dodge reality, not least because in America rapture theology had its major birthplace right here in our host city, Chicago.

As church historians have noted, since the Protestant reformation it has been especially during times of war and depression and stock market crashes that these sorts of theologies of eternal security or heavenly rescue have played to good effect and have been most zealously embraced. One can see this in modern dispensational circles especially. Among conservative Christians during the Gulf War and the Iraq War there was a spike in sales of books such as John Walvoord’s *Armagedon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis*¹ or of novels like the “Left Behind” series.

Looking for the spiritual equivalent of comfort food, many people have consumed such notions in large quantities. Of course the irony and paradox has been that while at the same time the larger culture was placing more and more emphasis on Homeland Security through political means this has only ramped up the fears of many, including those already most prone to think apocalyptically about our times. The rhetoric of empire, however well coordinated with certain kinds of theological reflections “that all will be well and all manner of things will be well,” has not succeeded in quieting the spiritually disquieted, and as we shall see, it did not do so in Paul’s day either.

¹ Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

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Our task in this essay is to examine in somewhat cursory fashion the rhetoric of “rapture” set over against the “rhetoric of empire,” using 1 Thessalonians 4–5 as a context for a discussion of theological safety or security during tribulation. We will discover that “the assurance of things hoped for” did not entail a guarantee of either eternal security or of an escape clause should things go bump in the night on planet earth.

Head in the Clouds—The Theology of Rapture

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I have elsewhere chronicled at some length the amazing story of that modern phenomenon known as Dispensationalism or in England as Darbyism.² This theology, interestingly enough, did not arise in the first place in America but in Scotland and England in the first half of the nineteenth century, but it certainly flourished like a native plant when it was brought to America by J. N. Darby and then promulgated at length by D. L. Moody of Chicago, among others. In fact the first American Christian bestseller after the Civil War, *Jesus is Coming*, was written right here in Chicago by an entrepreneur named W. E. Dubois (1878), trumpeting the rapture theology and the imminent but invisible return of Christ.

Dispensational theology was and is synthetic in nature, by which I mean it has a propensity to glue together otherwise disparate texts in order to create a picture of a deeply cherished theological idea—in this case the pre-tribulation or mid-tribulation rapture of the faithful out of the world when the maelstrom of final judgment begins to afflict a fallen and sinful world. Bits from Revelation are welded onto bits from the teaching of Jesus, but it is fair to say that while such texts provide the superstructure of such notions, the real engine and chassis of this vehicle comes from a certain interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4, which is where we will concentrate our attention.

The linchpin text for a rapture theology is of course 1 Thess 4:13–5:11³ which reads in part:

For this I say to you in/on the word of the Lord that we the living, those who are left around until the parousia of the Lord will not forestall those who have fallen asleep, for the Lord himself with a summons, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God will come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise first; then we the living, those left around, together with them shall be caught up in the clouds unto the public welcoming of the Lord in the air and so we will

² See Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005). See the two chapters entitled “On Dispensing with Dispensationalism.”

³ For an in-depth treatment of other “rapture” texts including the “left behind” texts from Matt 24 and parallels see Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*.

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always be with the Lord. So console one another with these words. But concerning the times and seasons brothers, you have no need for me to write to you, for you yourselves know accurately that the day of the Lord as a thief in the night, thus it shall come.

To understand this text one must realize that the Parousia is not something different from the second coming or the coming of the thief in the night or the glorious appearing of Christ. These are all alternate ways of describing the same dramatic event. The public nature of the event is stressed. It involves a public herald (in this case an angel) and a trumpet blast announcing to all that Christ is coming. The imagery here presupposed is drawn from the notion of a royal visit to a city, with the cry of command going up to the watchman on the walled city as we see in the royal entrance liturgy in Psalm 24. Our text then says that the dead in Christ will rise and go to meet Christ in the air and will be joined by the living in Christ.

The location of this rendezvous is not heaven but the earth's atmosphere. More importantly, the place where the gathering goes after meeting is down to earth to reign, not up to heaven to escape a tribulation. This is perfectly clear from the use of the royal visitation language in 1 Thessalonians 4. The greeting committee goes out to meet the Lord where he is and then welcomes him back into the walled city. Though Paul does not spell this out in detail, the allusion is so clear that it could hardly have been missed by the Thessalonians who had had such royal visitations in the past, indeed whose city was named for the sister of Alexander the Great himself. In other words there is no concept of the "rapture" in the NT, if by rapture one means something more than a meeting of Christ in the air at the second coming. There is no "beam me up Scotty" theology in the NT. Indeed, if one actually studies this text in the larger context of 1 Thessalonians it becomes clear that the Thessalonians had already suffered, and some had apparently died for their faith. The anxiety being responded to here was not whether they had been martyred (and others might be) but whether the dead in Christ would miss out on the return of Christ, which Paul reassures they will not.

The Social and Literary Context of 1 Thessalonians 4–5

There is more to the social and rhetorical context of this text than at first meets the eye. Notice first the connection in 1 Thess 4:13 between grieving and being like the remainder of humanity that has no hope. *It is the inevitability of death which robs persons of their sense of hope or security.* Notice also the use of the present subjunctive verb which implies the cessation of something. The Thessalonians are grieving for those Christians they have already lost, and Paul wants them to stop grieving for them.

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Grieving is for those without hope, and it is the natural reaction for those who have no positive view of the afterlife. Notice as well the implication of the phrase “the rest of humanity who have no hope.” Paul is suggesting that outside of Christ there is no hope of life beyond death. Paul was certainly no universalist or pluralist when it came to the matter of salvation, but it was not just that pagans had no hope of a positive afterlife. According to 1 Thess 1:10 and 5:9 (cf. Rom 1:18–32; 11:7; Eph 2:3) they faced the judgment of God both in the present and in the future. Things look bleak for pagans from Paul’s viewpoint.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, *Paul is assuming that for Christians an increase in hope will cause an increase in holiness.* They will be in earnest about Christian behavior because they know what is coming. He is also assuming that a proper knowledge of the fate of the Christian dead should put a stop to hopeless grieving. In 4:13 *kathōs kai* really cannot be translated “to the same extent as the pagans.” Paul is here urging a cessation of grieving altogether, the grieving which was already ongoing.

Although grammatically awkward, in the second half of v. 14 Paul is showing what follows from believing Jesus died and rose. This belief has a consequence for what we should believe about the fate of the Christian dead. The structure of the Greek as we have it favors linking the phrase “through Jesus” with “those who have fallen asleep.” But, what does it mean to have fallen asleep through Jesus? Does it mean what Acts 7:29 suggests, that Jesus will receive the spirit of the Christian when she dies? Possibly this is so, but it is not probable.

It is possible that *dia* (“through”) has the force of *en* here, in which case Paul is speaking about dying *in* the Lord—i.e., dying as a Christian (1 Cor 15:18). In fact, the aorist participle *koimethenta* favors this interpretation since it refers to the moment, not the condition of death: they died in the Lord. It is only deceased Christians that Jesus will bring with him or bring back from the dead when he returns at the Parousia.⁴ This may mean they will be brought with Jesus from heaven, but it may simply mean they will be brought back from the dead and so raised when Jesus returns, as texts like 1 Cor 6:14 and 2 Cor 4:14 suggest. Paul assumes that the concern in Thessalonica was not about resurrection per se but about the relationship of the Christian dead to the Parousia and whether they would participate in the greeting party in the air, when Jesus returned and they would be with him forever. In no case is Paul assuring his audience that they have

⁴ As in 1 Cor 15 Paul operates with a concept of the resurrection of the righteous. In 1 Cor 15 he can talk about Christ being the first fruits and those in Christ the latter fruits of the resurrection. This is in part because for Paul resurrection means for the believer full conformity to the image of Christ, something the dead outside Christ will not receive when Christ returns. See the discussion in Witherington, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

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an escape clause so that they may expect to avoid persecution and the fate of those who have already died in the Lord, unless of course they happen to live until the Lord returns.

Verse 15 has been a flashpoint in the discussion of Pauline eschatology at least since the time of A. Schweitzer. Here, it is said, we have proof positive that Paul believed that he would definitely live to see the Parousia of Jesus. Unfortunately, these sorts of discussions have tended to overlook at least a couple of key factors: Paul did not know in advance when he would die⁵ and he argues that the second coming will happen at an unexpected time, like a thief in the night. It could be sooner, it could be later, and in either case the *indeterminacy* of the timing is what fuels exhortations that one must always be prepared and alert. It needs to be stressed that since Paul did not know the specific timing of either his death or the return of Christ, and does not claim to know such things, he could *not* have said “We who are dead and not left around to see the parousia of the Lord.”

In short, Paul did not know that he would *not* be alive when Jesus returns, and so the only category in which he can logically place himself and his contemporary Christians is the category of the “living.”⁶ What these verses surely imply is that Paul thought it *possible* that he might be alive when Jesus returned. Paul, as E. Best has stressed, until he was much older and near death, always had both possibilities before him, both the possibility of living until the Parousia and the possibility of dying first and rising at the Parousia when Jesus returned.⁷ The reason we do not hear the language of possible survival until the Parousia in the later Pauline letters is because one of the two unknown factors, the timing of Paul’s death, was becoming more likely to precede the Parousia. We should not speak of Paul’s changing his view about the second coming or his considering it *delayed* in the later Paulines for the very good reason that the term “delay” implies that one knows with some precision when it was supposed to happen so that when it does not happen one could speak of it as being “late.” Paul’s imagery of the thief implies a denial of knowing with that sort of precision. Here it could be argued Paul combines a saying of Jesus with his own reflections on Dan 7:13–14 and 12:2–3.

Paul saw himself as both a prophetic interpreter of the sayings of the historical Jesus and of the OT and also as someone who received direct messages from the risen Lord himself. In 1 Thess 4:15–5:7 Paul draws on the Jesus tradition found in Matthew 24, but in vv. 16–

⁵ One thing this text probably does suggest is that Paul was in good health at this juncture and did not anticipate his imminent demise.

⁶ See the more detailed discussion in Witherington, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World*.

⁷ See E. Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, (London: A. & C. Clark, 1972), 195–96. Paul’s imagery of the thief implies a denial of knowing with that sort of precision.

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17 he also draws on both his own reading of Daniel and prophetic insight that he himself had been given by the risen Lord. The following chart shows the various parallels:

Theme	1 Thessalonians	Matthew
Christ returns	4:16	24:30
from heaven	4:16	24:30
accompanied by angels	4:16	24:31
with a trumpet of God	4:1	24:31
believers gathered to Christ	4:17	24:31, 40–41
in clouds	4:17	24:30
time unknown	5:1–2	24:36
coming like a thief	5:2, 4	24:43
unbelievers unaware of coming judgment	5:3	24:37–39
judgment like a mother's birthpangs	5:3	24:8
believers not deceived	5:4–5	24:43
believers to be watchful	5:6	24:37–39
warning vs. drunkenness ⁸	5:7	24:49

These parallels should not be minimized, and they make it likely that Paul is drawing on the general sense, trajectory, and imagery of some of that Synoptic material. They also make clear an important point. Paul did not think there is some difference between the Parousia and the second coming (or glorious appearing). Indeed, as in Matt 24 all of this material is referring to one event, the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds. Notice that the parallels with Matt 24 continue in 1 Thess 5:1–11. This is because Paul does not think he is describing some different event in 1 Thess 5:1–11 than he was in 1 Thess 4:13–18. We can say with even more assurance that the rhetorical function here of citing a “word of the Lord” is to console and reassure the audience about the fate of their deceased Thessalonian brothers and sisters and their equal participation in the Parousia event.⁹

⁸ Here I am following D. Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 303–14 who should be consulted at length on the whole matter of Paul's use of the Jesus traditions. See his “Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse,” in *Gospel Perspectives* (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 345–75.

⁹ This reassurance may have been particularly needed by any in Thessalonica who knew teaching such as that found in 4 *Ezra* 13:24 which states that those who survive to the end are more blessed than those who die before it.

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At this juncture something needs to be said about the background of the Danielic material. Daniel 7:13–14 is, of course, part of the famous oracle about “the one like a Son of Man” (*bar ʿenāš*). Though it has been debated as to whether this figure goes up into the clouds and heaven to meet the Ancient of Days or comes with the clouds to meet the Almighty on earth for the day of judgment, in light of v. 14 Paul’s view must surely be the latter. It is the kingdoms “under heaven” that are handed over to the Son of Man and to the saints, and we are told all rulers will worship and obey this figure. It is surely not envisioned that these non-Jewish kingdoms and rulers are in heaven or are ruled from heaven. The rule, like the final judgment, takes place on earth. Notice as well the statement that the Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven, an image of clouds coming down from above, not clouds rising up from the earth with someone ascending with them. Theophanies were described as involving this very sort of motion with clouds involved, and a theophany by definition always takes place on earth. This background material is important for another reason. Daniel 7 is about this Son of Man ruling on earth over those who had oppressed God’s people. It is not about rescuing God’s people out of this world into heaven for an interim period of time. The Son of Man language and imagery taken over from Daniel 7 in the sayings of Jesus in Matthew 24 and here by Paul in 1 Thessalonians provide further proof that 1 Thess 4:13–17 is not about a rapture.

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The phrase “we the living, those who are left around/remain” is important for it means Paul envisions that Christians will still be living on planet earth when Jesus returns. It also may suggest that he thinks *the majority* of Christians will be dead when Christ returns.¹⁰ But, could the return Paul envisions be said to be a secret or invisible one? Do we have some sort of theology of a pre-tribulation rapture with Jesus not actually coming to earth? The details of the text as well as the use of the language of the royal visit to a city surely rule such a view out.

It has been rightly stressed by G. Beale that we should probably take vv. 14–15 together, with v. 15 providing the reason why believers can be confident about the resurrection of the deceased Christians, namely that Jesus himself spoke of this matter and affirmed this truth.¹¹ We should also not neglect what Paul says in v. 15b, namely that the living shall not have precedence or any advantage over those who have fallen asleep when it comes to participating in the Parousia event. All believers will be on the same footing when Jesus returns.

As v. 16 makes quite clear, Paul connects the resurrection of believers who are dead with the Parousia and with the meeting of Christ in the air. Clearly it is the Parousia which

¹⁰ When one talks about a remainder, the implication seems to be that a minority of the total number is referred to. See I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2002), 127.

¹¹ G. Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 135.

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precipitates these other two events. Notice that there is no mention of the resurrection of unbelievers at this juncture. Paul takes that to be a separate event and one that occurs on a different occasion (contrast *4 Ezra* 4:1–5). Verse 16 makes it as clear as one could want that we are dealing with a public event, announced not only by a loud command as on a battle field¹² and the voice of the archangel (see *Jude* 9; *1 En.* 20:1–7; *4 Ezra* 4:36) but also by the trumpet call of God, though these may be three ways of referring to the same thing.

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The images conjured up are martial, as if Jesus were summoning his army. Notice that in *2 Thess* 1:7 we also find angels playing a role in the second coming (cf. *Mark* 13:24–27). Only audible factors are mentioned in *1 Thess* 4:16. The meeting place is said to take place in the clouds or in the air, not in heaven. Notice that Paul considers the dead in Christ to be persons who can be “awakened” or “addressed.” It is quite likely that Paul is drawing on the Day of the Lord traditions, which refer to a trumpet blast announcing the event (cf. *Isa* 27:13; *Joel* 2:1; *Zech* 9:14; *4 Ezra* 6:23; *Sib. Or.* 4:174; *1 Cor* 15:52).

It was also the case that a royal visit to a city would be announced by a herald (see *Psa* 24:7–10) and might well also be announced by a trumpet blast meant to alert those in the city that the king was coming. This imagery is pursued further in v. 17 with the use of the term *apantēsin*. Notice for example what Cicero says of Julius Caesar’s victory tour through Italy in 49 BC: “Just imagine what a meeting/royal welcome (*apantēseis*) he is receiving from the towns, what honors are paid to him” (*Ad. Att.* 8.16.2) and compare 16.11.6 of Augustus: “the municipalities are showing the boy remarkable favor.... Wonderful *apantēsis* and encouragement”). This word then refers to the action of the greeting committee who goes forth from the city to meet the royal person or dignitary before he arrives at the city gate to pay an official visit. The greeting committee will then escort the dignitary back into town on the final part of his journey. “These analogies (especially in association with the term *parousia*) suggest the possibility that the Lord is pictured here as escorted the remainder of the journey to earth by his people—both those newly raised from the dead and those remaining alive.”¹³

John Chrysostom picked up these nuances quite clearly. He says “For when a king drives into a city, those who are honorable go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within. And upon the coming of an affectionate father, his children indeed, and those who are worthy to be his children, are taken out in a chariot, that they may see him and kiss him; but the housekeepers who have offended him remain within.” (*Hom. 8 on 1*

¹² Cf. *Prov* 30:27 LXX; Thucydides *Hist.* 2.92.

¹³ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Waco: Word, 1982), 103.

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Thess).¹⁴ Paul's Thessalonian audience may have missed some of the allusions to the OT, but they would not have missed the language used here about a royal visit, indeed an imperial visit (cf. also Acts 28:15). They would remember the visit of Pompey and later Octavian and others in the days when Thessalonica could even be talked about by Pompey as the capital in exile. There is more to be said along these lines as Paul keeps using such loaded language in 1 Thessalonians 5. K. Donfried sums things up nicely:

If 1 Thessalonians is at all representative of his original preaching then we certainly do find elements which could be understood or misunderstood in a distinctly political sense. In 2:12 God, according to the Apostle, calls the Thessalonian Christians "into his own kingdom"; in 5:3 there is a frontal attack on the *Pax et Securitas* program of the early Principate; and in the verses just preceding this attack one finds three heavily loaded political terms: *parousia*, *apantēsis*, and *kyrios*. *Parousia* is related to "the 'visit' of the king, or some other official." When used as court language *parousia* refers to the arrival of Caesar, a king or an official. *Apantēsis* refers to the citizens meeting a dignitary who is about to visit the city. These two terms are used in this way by Josephus (*Ant.* XI.327ff.) and also similarly referred to by such Greek writers as Chrysostom. The term *kyrios*, especially when used in the same context as the two preceding terms, also has a definite political sense. People in the eastern Mediterranean applied the term *kyrios* to the Roman emperors from Augustus on ... All of this, coupled with the use of *euaggelion* and its possible association with the eastern ruler cult suggests that Paul and his associates could easily be understood as violating "the decrees of Caesar" in the most blatant manner.¹⁵

Donfried then goes on to suggest that the dead in Christ in Thessalonica were victims of the persecutions alluded to elsewhere in this letter, which is certainly possible. In Acts 7:60 Stephen is stoned and then "he fell asleep" (*ekoimēthē*). This language in the context of persecution could refer to one who suffered death through persecution. We may need to take seriously that the charge Paul and his co-workers had violated the decrees of Caesar (see Acts 17:7) would have had severe repercussions not only for Paul and his co-workers but also for his converts. Some lost their lives. No wonder Paul was so concerned about them.

¹⁴ Notice as well that the going out to meet the dignitary is a great honor and is part of a public event, and note the implication that this authority figure will deal with the dishonorable when he returns inside the city or home.

¹⁵ K. P. Donfried, "The Imperial Cults and Political Conflict in 1 Thessalonians," in *Paul and Empire* (ed. R. A. Horsley; Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997), 215–223, here 217.

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However, Paul in 1 Thessalonians is not backing down from his anti-imperial rhetoric, or better said, his co-opting of imperial rhetoric and applying it to Jesus. It cannot be an accident that the word *parousia* shows up four times in 1 Thessalonians (2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23), twice in 2 Thessalonians (2:1, 8), and only once elsewhere in Paul (1 Cor 15:23). The borrowing of imperial rhetoric is especially apparent in the Thessalonian correspondence.¹⁶ H. Koester has helpfully pointed out that the problem in Thessalonica is certainly not the delay of the Parousia, but rather concern about the fate of the Thessalonian Christian dead, concern exacerbated by persecution and possibly even martyrdom. Will the dead Christians join the living in the great welcoming of the return of their Lord?¹⁷ Paul's answer is an emphatic yes, but in the course of giving that assurance and making some remarkable christological and eschatological assertions Paul is also busily deconstructing the extant pagan value system so his converts will not lapse back into allegiance to it. N. T. Wright puts it this way:

Paul's opposition to Caesar and adherence to a very high, very Jewish Christology were part of the same thing. Jesus was Lord—*kyrios*, with all its Septuagintal overtones—and Caesar was not.... [N]either the recognition that Paul's main target was paganism, and the Caesar-cult in particular, nor the equal recognition that he remained a thoroughly Jewish thinker, should blind us for a moment to the fact that Paul still held a thorough and stern critique of non-messianic Judaism.... [I]f Paul's answer to Caesar's empire is the empire of Jesus, what does this say about this new empire, living under the rule of its new Lord?... [T]his counter-empire can never be merely critical, never merely subversive. It claims to be the reality of which Caesar's empire is the parody. It claims to be modeling the genuine humanness, not least the justice and peace, and the unity across traditional racial and cultural barriers, of which Caesar's empire boasted.¹⁸

Notice that it is particularly in Paul's more eschatological sections of his letters that the imperial cult language shows up. This is because the imperial cult was an eschatological institution itself, suggesting that a human being, namely the Emperor, was divine and was walking around on the earth bringing the final form of peace and security to earth

¹⁶ One has to wonder whether Paul was reflecting on the crackdown of Claudius on Jews and Christians in Rome in A.D. 49 and its aftermath as Claudius' reign deteriorated into bad government in his last years (i.e., A.D. 49–54), a crackdown which gave officials and others in a city like Thessalonica a license to treat Paul and his co-workers and converts as they apparently did.

¹⁷ H. Koester, "Imperial Ideology and Paul's Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians," in *Paul and Empire* (ed. R. A. Horsley; Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997), 158–66, see 158–59 especially.

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics* (ed. R. A. Horsley; Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), 160–83, here 182–83.

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(see Virgil's *Aeneid*), a thought fully embraced in the eastern part of the Empire.¹⁹ Paul came into the same segment of the empire suggesting there was another God walking on the earth offering a kingdom, and this one had even come back from the dead. In such an environment this was an explosive message with considerable political implications. This message qualified as a subversive one, violating Caesar's decrees.

It should be clear from the beginning of v. 16 that Christ is said to come *down* out of heaven and meets his followers somewhere else, in this case in the atmosphere where there are clouds. There is likely an echo of Micah 1:3 here: "For behold the Lord is coming forth out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth." Clouds are regularly said to accompany a theophany, when God comes down to the human level, not when humans are taken up into the presence of God in heaven (see Exod 19:16; 40:34; 1 Kgs 8:10–11; Ps 97:2). Trumpet blasts also accompany theophanies (Exod 19:16; Isa 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zech 9:14).²⁰ The meeting does not take place in heaven, so there is no discussion of rapture into heaven even here.²¹

Paul then adds as the ultimate reassurance about the dead in Christ that they will rise *first*, after which according to v. 17 the living Christians will be snatched up in a bodily condition (cf. Rev 12:5; Acts 8:39; Wis 4:11)²² together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and be with the Lord forever.²³ Far from the deceased Christians being left out of the Parousia party, they will be first to be involved. It will be the ultimate family reunion with the King. There may be echoes here of the promises made sometimes in Greco-Roman contexts and epitaphs that the deceased would be with the "heroes,"

¹⁹ There is now a fascinating study by D. R. Wallace entitled *The Gospel of God: Romans as Paul's Aeneid* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008) which argues that in Romans Paul is co-opting the rhetoric of the *Aeneid* to tell a counter story called the gospel of God.

²⁰ See Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 129. The clear implication is that the Parousia of Christ is the coming of God to earth.

²¹ The term rapture does not appear in the NT. It comes from the Latin term *raptus*, which is a rendering of the Greek here, for *raptus* in Latin means "snatched." The idea is present in 4 Ezra 6:26 and 14:9 and also in Gen 5:24 LXX, where it is used of Enoch being taken up into heaven. The word itself, however, whether in Greek or Latin does not carry the connotation of "into heaven," as the texts which speak of death doing the snatching or the land of the dead being the place to which one was snatched make clear.

²² Interestingly and ironically this verb is used in Plutarch, *Letter to Apollonius* 111C–D, 117B and Lucian, *Funerals* 13 to refer to the action of death itself. Inscriptions as well refer to fate snatching away loved ones into the realm of the dead (IG II.1062a.3; 11477.9; IV.620.2; V.733.12). *Fourth Ezra* 5:42 is interesting for it says "just as for those who are last there is no delay, so for those who are first there is no haste." Paul is using funerary language, another little clue that the rhetoric here is epideictic in character.

²³ The classical distinction between the pure ether of heaven and the atmosphere which has clouds in it is preserved here (see e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 8.558; 17.371; and we find it also in Christian writers, Athenagoras, *Leg.* 5 and *Eph.* 2.2). *Eis aera* here denotes that the Lord will descend into the immediate region of the earth, where he will be met by believers.

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perhaps even in the Elysian fields. How much better to be with the Lord himself than just the heroes?

Paul does not tell us here what he thinks happens next after the reunion in the air. That information is conveyed in 1 Corinthians 15, and in both these texts nothing is said or suggested about non-believers participating in this resurrection. Paul separates what will happen to believers and what will happen to non-believers when Christ returns. Note the reference to future wrath in 1 Thess 5:9. What Paul most wants to convey about what happens at the Parousia is that the dead will not only not be left out or be disadvantaged, they will in fact take precedence. In a culture where pecking order was important, it would have reversed normal expectations to suggest that the dead had an advantage over the living.

First Thessalonians 4:18 involves an exhortation to encourage and comfort each other with these eschatological promises, the very sort of rhetoric that would be appropriate in an epideictic attempt to help the bereaved (cf. 1 Thess 5:11). With hope in the *Parousia* and coming resurrection they could expect to see their departed Thessalonian Christian friends again, but also they could expect a reunion with all the believers and with Jesus. Notice finally that the Thessalonians were actively to convey this consolation to each other (cf. *P. Oxy.* 115: *paregoreite oun eautous*). It was not just a matter of hearing and heeding what Paul said. They were to participate in their own healing.

It Takes a Thief

The second division of the eschatological parenesis in 1 Thessalonians 4–5 begins at 5:1. The use of *peri de* as well as the use of the term “brothers” makes evident that Paul sees this as a new topic or a new angle on a previously discussed topic, and here it is clearly one which is related to what has just been said about the *Parousia*. In 1 Thessalonians 5 the rhetorical function of the eschatological material is a bit different. Rather than consolation through new information, this segment is more about exhortation based on the eschatological knowledge the audience *already* has. This section seems to have three divisions, the markers of each involve the word *de* (“but”): “but concerning” in 5:1, “but you” in 5:4, “but we” in 5:8. Paul will deal in turn with three related topics in these sections: the sudden and for some unexpected coming of the day of the Lord when unbelievers will be judged (5:1–3), the preparation of believers for that day (5:4–7), and the necessary faithfulness of God’s people, which is the basis for encouraging one another (5:8–11). The structure of this material is carefully framed with the section ending with an inference to be drawn in v. 11 from what has just been said.

P. Oxy. Oxyrhynchus Papyri

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It is helpful to compare what is said in this whole passage with Rom 13:11–14. There are obvious similarities in the use of the language about waking and sleeping and sobriety. If there is debate about which of these passages conveys more of a sense that the eschatological clock is ticking and the end may be nearer than one thinks, it is surely the Romans passage, which just goes to show that no easy evolutionary development schema will work when analyzing Pauline eschatology. Romans was surely written after 2 Corinthians, and yet Paul is still talking about the return of Christ, and how the day of the Lord is possibly imminent.

The attempt to take 1 Thess 5:1–11 as if it were referring to events *after* the catching up of believers into the air, rather than seeing 1 Thess 4:13–18 and 5:1–11 as both talking about the Parousia in different ways, must be said to be special pleading. Both of these passages deal with one and only Parousia/return of Christ from slightly different angles and with differing rhetorical functions, both commending the same sort of behavior of Christians in light of the eschatological events. The exhortations in 1 Thess 5:1–11 would be pointless if in fact believers were not envisioned as still on earth until the Day of the Lord. Notice the repetition of the phrase “with the Lord” in 4:17 and 5:10 and the similar endings directed toward the immediate audience in 4:18 and 5:11. Both the context and the content of these passages indicate that Paul is speaking in both of the one and only second coming.²⁴ What is not usually appreciated is that while the former passage examines the second coming from the angle of coming rescue of believers the latter passage examines the same event from the perspective of judgment on unbelievers.²⁵

The phrase *chronoi kai kairoi* in 5:1 is an important one found elsewhere in early Jewish and early Christian literature (Acts 1:7; 1 Pet 1:11; Ign. *Pol.* 3; cf. Neh 10:34; 13:31; Dan 2:21; Wis 8:8; Eccl 3:1; and Demosthenes, *Olynth.* 3 para. 32). It is too simple to say that *chronos* refers to a longer period of time and *kairos* a shorter one. *Chronos* is the general term for time, whether a long or short period is involved, and refers to the date of something if a particular event is in mind. *Kairos* can refer to place or time and has the sense of the fit measure, the appropriate or propitious moment or the right place. In reference to time it surely refers to the right moment. In short, *chronos* refers more to the quantity of time, while *kairos* refers to the quality of time, or of other things, and sense the propitious moment is usually a brief one, it often does refer to a short length of time, though this is incidental to its real thrust. The gist of the phrase here then is that the audience has no need to be informed about how much time must elapse before the big event happens or what significant occurrences will mark or punctuate that crucial

²⁴ See T. Howard, “The Literary Unity of 1 Thessalonians 4.13–5.11,” *Grace Theological Journal* 9 (1988): 163–90, rebutting the Dispensational reading of these texts.

²⁵ Rightly noted by C. Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 177–78.

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occasion.²⁶ Paul refuses to set up timetables for this event because he cannot do so.²⁷ The timing has not been revealed. Indeed, what had been revealed is that no one knows the timing of this event, not even Jesus during his ministry (Mark 13:32). All the pointless speculation about the timing of the rapture or the return of Christ is an exercise in futility because the former event is not going to happen, and we are told that the latter event will happen at a hitherto undisclosed time.

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Verse 2 then tells us nothing about when Jesus will come, but rather *how*—in a sudden and unexpected manner.²⁸ Paul is describing a sudden intrusion into human history which will catch many unaware and unprepared. The controlling metaphor “thief in the night” goes back to the Jesus tradition (cf. Matt 24:43; Luke 12:38–39; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15) and stresses both the suddenness and unexpectedness of the event but also its unknown timing. It also has an aura of threat or unwelcomeness to it, at least for the unprepared.²⁹ Strictly speaking it is the Day of the Lord, rather than Jesus, that is said to come like a thief, although it is used of Jesus in Rev 3:3 and 16:15.

Paul uses several related phrases to refer to this coming event—the day (1 Thess 5:4; 1 Cor 3:13; Rom 2:5; cf. 13:12), that day (2 Thess 1:10), the Day of the Lord (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2; 1 Cor 5:5), the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:8), the Day of the Lord Jesus (2 Cor 1:14), the Day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6), or simply the Day of Christ (Phil 1:10; 2:16). Paul has adopted and adapted the Day of the Lord traditions from the OT and applied them to Christ, for now it is Christ who will bring the final redemption and judgment to earth.³⁰ If one compares 1 Thess 4:14–17 and 1 Thess 5:2 it becomes clear that “the day” is the same as “the Day of the Lord” which in turn is the same as the Parousia. It is in no way surprising that when the phrase “Day of the Lord” is used by Paul, judgment is most frequently spoken of since it is this phrase which in the Hebrew

²⁶ It is of course possible since this is epideictic rhetoric that Paul is using these terms as virtual synonyms, and so we would have an example of pleonasm or fullness and redundancy of expression. See Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 132. However, throughout the history of Greek usage, including in modern times, these two words when juxtaposed had distinct meanings. Today *chronos* refers to the year, *kairos* to the time.

²⁷ We may point out that Paul is capable of talking about events that must precede the Parousia, as a way of making clear that the end is not yet at hand, but he does not speak of these events as sign markers or events which trigger the return of Christ and so must be closely juxtaposed in time with the Parousia.

²⁸ The Greek phrase *en taxei* can either be used adjectively or adverbially. It can mean “soon,” but it can also mean “suddenly.” Too often scholars have simply ignored the possibility of translating the phrase “suddenly” (literally “in quickness”), overlooking the fact that the controlling metaphor when it came to discussion of the coming of the Lord/Son of Man was “thief in the night,” a metaphor which suggests a sudden break-in at an unexpected time.

²⁹ See Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 133–34.

³⁰ Of course he is probably not the first one to make this transfer. It seems to go back to Jesus and what he says about the coming of the Son of Man for judgment (Mark 14:62).

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Scriptures and LXX was used most often to speak of coming judgment (cf. Rom 2:5).³¹ Zephaniah 1:15–18; 2:2–3, and 3:8 (cf. Amos 5:18–20; Obad 15; Joel 1:15; 2:1–2, 31–32; Zech 14:1–21) stress the idea that the Day of the Lord is a day of God’s judgment, though in Obadiah and Zechariah it is also a day of deliverance. Paul says with emphasis that his audience knows very well about this matter. There is a note of irony here. The audience knows very well that the timing of the Parousia has not been revealed and so is unknown and unpredictable.³² In addition, Paul says that this day will come like an event at night!³³ If this is not a use of metaphor and simile, nothing is.

Verse 3 begins with the phrase “when they say peace and security.” It has sometimes been conjectured that Paul is drawing on an OT phrase here, perhaps Jer 6:14 or Ezek 13:10. The latter text condemns false prophets for crying “peace” when there is no peace, but it says nothing about security specifically, though the comments about the whitewashed wall may imply such a concern. Jeremiah 6:14 is of the very same ilk, criticizing false prophets for crying “peace, peace” when there is no peace. Clearly Paul’s phrase is not a direct quote of an OT phrase, and if his audience is mainly former pagans, as 1 Thess 1 clearly indicates, they could not be expected to recognize such an allusion anyway. “When *they* say ...” is also a very odd way to refer to the OT prophets, but it makes perfect sense if Paul is quoting a cliché or proverb familiar in his audience’s world. As A. Malherbe notes, the diction is not Pauline; Paul does not use either *legōsin* or *eirenē* in quite the same sense elsewhere, and he does not use *asphaleia* at all elsewhere.³⁴ There is some likelihood that at least the second half of this sentence is echoing the Jesus tradition, specifically material found in Luke 21:34–36, but again that material does not account for the combined use of “peace and security,” and Paul would hardly introduce a word of Jesus by “when *they* say,” which suggests outsiders not insiders.

In fact, there were inscriptions up all over the Empire attributing to Rome and to its army the bringing of peace and security to one region after another. For example, in Syria we have the inscription which reads “The Lord Marcus Flavius Bonus, the most illustrious Comes and Dux of the first legion, has ruled over us in peace and given constant ‘peace and security’ to travelers and to the people” (OGIS 613). Velleius Paterculus says “On that day there sprang up once more in parents the assurance of safety of their property, and in all men the assurance of safety, order, peace, and tranquility” (II.103.5). It is added

LXX Septuagint

³¹ See the discussion in Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*, 163–65.

³² Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 178–79. The term *akribōs* occurs only here and in Eph 5:15 in Paul and refers to investigating something with great care and so knowing beyond reasonable doubt. See Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2:175.

³³ A. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 290.

³⁴ See Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 180.

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that “The Pax Augusta which has spread to the regions of the east and of the west, and to the bounds of the north and the south, preserves every corner of the world safe/secure from the fear of banditry” (II.126.3). Tacitus speaks of the time after the year of the three Emperors as a time when security was restored, and then he adds that the “security of peace” includes work without anxiety in the fields and in the homes (*Hist.* 2.21.2; 2.12.1). Not to be plundered by robbers either at home or on journeys is “peace and security” (Josephus, *Ant.* 14:158–60, 247).

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A variant of this “peace and security” slogan was that of “peace and concord.” We find this in inscriptions dating back to 139 B.C. referring to a pact between Rome and the cities of Asia “preserving mutual goodwill with peace and all concord and friendship” (SIG 685:14–15).³⁵ Paul must have thought “What foolish slogans and vain hopes when the Day of the Lord is coming.” Paul is critiquing the slogans and propaganda about the *Pax Romana*. It is on those who offer this rhetoric that destruction will come, which may suggest that Paul foresaw the same future for Rome and its empire and those who cooperated with it as John of Patmos did in Rev 6–19.³⁶ Paul does not want his audience to be beguiled by such rhetoric, especially after Paul has been expelled and they have suffered persecution from those who are supposedly the bringers of “peace and security.” It is the imperial propaganda and prophecies to which Paul is offering a rebuttal. Paul is rebutting the ancient equivalent of homeland security political rhetoric with his own theological rhetoric.

What is predicted for those who offer this slogan is sudden destruction, which comes upon them much like a birth pang suddenly seizes a pregnant woman unexpectedly (cf. Ps 48:6; Isa 26:17; 66:8; Jer 30:6–7; Mic 4:9; 4 Ezra 16:35–39; 1 En. 62:1–6). The wording is closely parallel to Luke 21:34–36.³⁷ Paul stresses the fact that there can be no escape from this coming destruction for “them.” Paul is not a crusader against the Empire in the sense of someone leading a social movement for reform. Rather he is a believer that God in Christ will intervene once and for all and right the wrongs that he and his audience have been experiencing because of their witness. God in Christ is the one who will bring justice and peace and security once and for all, not the emperor with his slogans. Paul will say more on this theme in 2 Thess 2. The rhetorical effect of what Paul has done is to create a sense of urgency in regard to heeding the exhortations. “Paul in no way seeks to decrease, let alone defuse, the eschatological pressure felt by the Thessalonians.”³⁸ And this brings

SIG *Sylloge inscriptionum graecarum*, ed. W. Dittenberger

³⁵ For more of this sort of evidence see the detailed discussion in K. Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 19–26, and in regard to our text, 77–78.

³⁶ On Revelation see Witherington, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ad loc.

³⁷ See Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* 134–35.

³⁸ Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 208.

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us to a major conclusion: *rather than offering theological comfort food promising an escape from extreme suffering or death, Paul ramps up the eschatological pressure on the audience to remain faithful and be prepared to suffer and if need be die, before the Lord returns, implying in effect “blessed are those who die in the Lord henceforth.”*

In 1 Thess 5:4–5 we have a clear contrast between believers and unbelievers. Using the darkness and light metaphors Paul in essence says that his converts are neither in the state of darkness nor is the darkness the source of their existence.³⁹ They should not be surprised by the coming of the Day of the Lord, even if it arrives at an unexpected time. “Unpredictable events have different effects on those who are unprepared for them and those who are ready for them.”⁴⁰ Believers are children of the day, children of light (cf. Luke 16:8; John 12:38; Eph 5:8). The self-descriptive language of the in-group is much like that we find at Qumran (1QS III, 13–IV, 26; 1QM I, 1–3). A saying of Euripides helps us understand the force of the imagery: “Night is the time for thieves, daylight is the time for truth.” (*Iph. taur.* 1025–26). Verse 5 is interesting because it calls the audience both children of light and children of the day. Here we see the two poles of Paul’s eschatology. The light had already dawned in Christ, and his converts were already children of light, transformed into new creatures,⁴¹ but they awaited the day.

Provisionally they are also called children of the day, reassuring them they will be participants when Jesus returns.⁴² Notice that Paul says that “all” his audience are children of light and children of the day. Paul does not hold to a concept of an invisible elect within the church. He assumes his whole audience believes in Jesus and so is among the elect and will be children of the day. Before they arrive at that day there is much to prepare for and much to persevere through. They must remember that they are no longer of the night nor of darkness. They are not in a benighted condition, and they should not be caught out by the coming of the day.

Knowledge is power, but it can also be used for motivation, and in v. 6 Paul turns to his exhortation based on what the Thessalonians know about the eschatological situation. With *ara oun* (“so then”) as a marker that he is turning to a logical conclusion or a moral consequence of what he has just said, Paul draws an ethical conclusion about how Christian behavior should differ from that of “the rest.” It is interesting that Paul uses the

³⁹ In his helpful response to this essay Andy Johnson rightly pointed out that the saints here are seen as visible, and there is no hint in 1 Thessalonians of an invisible elect within the visible church. Rather the whole church is addressed throughout, and the whole church is warned of the real possibility and dangers of apostasy under pressure and persecution. The rhetoric calls for steadfastness and perseverance precisely because the audience might well do otherwise.

⁴⁰ Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 136.

⁴¹ Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 210.

⁴² See Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 144–45.

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metaphor not only of being awake and sober but of wearing certain clothes, or as we might say, keeping our day clothes on, to describe the state of preparedness of Christians for the Parousia.⁴³

The exhortation here probably owes something to Mark 13:34–37 (cf. also Matt 24:42–43), and in any case Paul is not saying what Clement of Alexandria later said, namely “we should sleep half-awake” (*Christ the Educator* 2.9.79). No, Paul is calling for his converts to remain awake, alert, and to remain sober (cf. Eph 5:14). Malherbe insightfully notes that while in those Synoptic texts alertness is mainly grounded in the fact that there is ignorance of the timing of the second coming, here it is mainly grounded in one’s Christian identity—a Christian is of the light and enlightened and as such should always remain morally and spiritually alert.⁴⁴ Paul is urging both intellectual and moral preparation and readiness for the Parousia. The opposite of this is being morally and spiritually asleep or unconscious. It is interesting that Plutarch the moralist also urges his audience to be awake and sober and contrasts this with being asleep or drunk using these same terms (*To an Uneducated Ruler* 781D). Christians are held to the standard of God’s twenty-four hours of daytime.

Verse 8 states the consequences of being daytime people. We must be awake and sober and put on the appropriate clothing to deal with the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” Notice the reference to the famous triad faith, hope, and love (cf. 1 Thess 1:3; 1 Cor 13). Here we have the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet is said to be the hope of salvation, seen as something to be experienced in the future, an imagery further developed in Eph 6:14–17. In both texts there is an indebtedness to Isa 59:17 where God wears the helmet of salvation on his head.

The terminology is probably chosen carefully. The most vulnerable part of a person in a life-threatening situation is the head. One can survive wounds to almost any other part of the body, but a deep wound to the head is usually mortal. The Scriptures therefore speak of the helmet of *soteria*, a term which can mean rescue, help, healing, or saving in a mundane or profound sense. In this case it is the helmet of the *hope* of salvation. What protects the believer against a mortal blow to one’s faith is to some degree the hope of salvation. If one has no hope or trust that God will one day make things right, then one’s faith is fragile and can be overwhelmed by the problems and the injustices of the present. This hope not only protects the person in the present, it gives them courage in the face of

⁴³ See Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 149.

⁴⁴ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 295.

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the coming judgment of God, knowing that one will be saved or rescued from that maelstrom.⁴⁵

Verse 9 reassures the converts that God did not appoint them to suffer judgment and wrath in the future but rather to receive salvation through “our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is not a promise of escape before Christ returns but rather of vindication when he does and thus avoidance of the judgment which comes after his return. The sentence begins with *hoti* (“because”). The converts are to put on the armor *because* God did not appoint them for wrath. Their destiny is different from those referred to as sleeping or drunk in v. 3.⁴⁶ Of course destinies and destinations can change. Those in darkness may finally see the light, and those in the light may make shipwreck of their faith. One reason Paul insists on speaking of salvation as something to be obtained⁴⁷ *in the future* is precisely because Christian behavior before one dies or Jesus returns can affect the outcome. One is not eternally secure until one is securely in eternity.

Salvation is a gift whether one is talking about initial or final salvation, but when one is referring to the latter, it is a gift given to those who have persevered, have put on the armor, have stayed alert, have remained faithful and true, and the like. The word *etheto* in v. 9 as elsewhere indicates God’s soteriological purpose. God appoints or destines believers for final salvation (cf. 1 Pet 2:8). This passage is somewhat like Rom 8:28–29, and in both cases the language of destining is used to reassure Christians, those who love God, about their future. *The subject is not about destining or electing some to be believers.* Finally notice that salvation is obtained through the Lord Jesus. He is the medium or agent of salvation, and if one is not connected to him, one cannot obtain final salvation. It is his work on the cross that makes possible the giving of the gift of salvation.

The idea is that God has provided the believer with the necessary “equipment” so that by putting on the armor, staying awake and alert, and persevering they may obtain the gift of final salvation. Paul “does not suggest that God’s plan is fulfilled independently of the action of [human beings] ... Paul’s exhortations to vigilance would be nonsensical if vigilance was the product of some inward causation in the believer by God or if there was no possibility of disobeying the exhortation.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Notice the reference in Gal 5:5 to waiting for the hope of righteousness. The consummation of everything for the believer comes when Christ returns and they are transformed into his likeness. This is clearly not a reference to Christ’s righteousness, but to the believers’ which they will not fully obtain or reflect until the return of Christ and their bodily transformation.

⁴⁶ See Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 298.

⁴⁷ The word *peripoiēsis* is rare and often refers to a possession (Eph 1:14; 1 Pet 2:9), but in 2 Thess 2:14 and Heb 10:39 it refers to obtaining.

⁴⁸ Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 139–40.

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G. Beale has rightly noticed the clear parallels between 1 Thess 4:14–18 and 5:10–11. Both sections conclude with essentially the same remark.⁴⁹ This makes quite clear that Paul is not addressing sequential events in 1 Thess 4:14–18 and 5:1–11. Verse 11 rounds out this entire section with the same words found at 4:18, except that here Paul amplifies them with the exhortation to build each other up, preparing for what he will say in 1 Thess 5:12–22, and then he concludes with the reassurance “just as also you are doing.” Confirmation that we have been on the right track all along in our interpretation of 1 Thess 4–5 comes when one examines 2 Thess 2 where it is perfectly clear that Christians are to expect only one return of Christ to gather the saints, and it comes after the tribulation.⁵⁰

The Implications of Paul’s Discourse for Contemporary Rhetoric about Peace, Security, and Salvation

Rhetoric can, of course, take many forms. Spiritual terms can be used to refer to political ends and aims, and political ends and aims can be used to refer to spiritual or even supernatural matters. In our own day when all sorts of false gospels about peace and security are abroad in the land, 1 Thessalonians 4–5 has much to teach us, as it cuts in various directions against such false gospels. Let us consider first the false peace and security of the rapture gospel.

One of the real weaknesses in the dispensational approach is that on the one hand with texts such as 1 Thessalonians 4–5 and 2 Thess 2:1 Dispensationalists want *parousia* to refer to the secret rapture of the church, while on the other hand they usually concede that *parousia* refers to the Second Coming in this very same argument at 2 Thess 2:8. But, Paul always uses the term *parousia* consistently when speaking of Jesus to refer to the second coming, an all too visible event. The further proof of this comes, not only because of the general use of this term to refer to a public event, but also because in this very context in vv. 8–9 we note how *parousia* is used in parallel with the verb “revealed” to refer to the very public coming of the lawless one.

In 2 Thess 2:1–2 Paul reminds his audience about the Parousia and the gathering of the believers to Christ at his coming, the subjects addressed in 1 Thess 5 and 4 respectively. We should compare the use of the term *episynagogēs* (“gathering”) to the use of the verbal form of the word in Mark 13:27 and Matt 24:31, where it refers to the gathering together of the believers at the coming of the Son of Man. In 2 Macc 2:7 it refers to the regathering

⁴⁹ The parallels include references to Jesus’ death in 4:14 and 5:10, the phrase “together with” in 4:16 and 5:10, and, of course, the identical closing exhortation “Encourage one another.” See Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 155.

⁵⁰ See C. Hill, *In God’s Time*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 205.

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of Jews into the temporal kingdom after the Babylonian exile.⁵¹ In 2 Thess 2:1 Paul is alluding to 1 Thess 4:17 and is speaking of the same event as he spoke of there, the second coming.

It is truly remarkable that it was 2 Thess 2:1–2 that caused J. N. Darby to become convinced of a rapture of the saints before the Day of the Lord, which in turn led to the attempt to distinguish what is referred to here from the discussion in 1 Thessalonians 5 about the return of Christ. Unfortunately for Darby's position, the subject of 1 Thessalonians 5 is the Day of the Lord, and that very same subject is discussed in 2 Thess 2:1–2, as the second of these verses makes perfectly evident.⁵²

What is the upshot of this reading of 1 Thessalonians 4–5, 2 Thessalonians 2, and the other related texts sometimes thought to refer to a rapture? The upshot is that unless by “rapture” one merely means being taken up into the air to welcome Christ and return with him to earth, there is no theology of the rapture to be found in the NT anywhere, never mind the term itself. If this is so, what then are the implications? If there is no rapture, much of the dispensational system falls down like a house of cards.

For one thing it means that the church of the last generation will go through the fire, just as every other generation of Christians has had to do. This is why Jesus' word of comfort in Mark 13 is not that we will be spared the tribulation but that God has shortened the time of it for the sake of the elect people of God, which clearly refers to the followers of Jesus (Mark 13:20). Notice what Rev 12:1–6 in fact promises. The woman, who represents the people of God, is not raptured out of the world when the devil pursues her; rather, she is protected from any spiritual harm while remaining in the world. Such is the lot of the people of God in every generation until the Lord returns. There will be no “beam me up Scotty” effect for the last generation of Christians. Rather, there will be suffering and martyrdom just as there was in the time when John wrote his Revelation. What was true then will also be true in the end.

What exactly is the Parousia and why was this term chosen to refer to the return of Christ? What difference, if any, does the literal meaning of this word make? It makes a considerable difference to the interpretation of this event.

It has been argued for instance that *parousia* refers merely to “presence” in 1 Thessalonians and that what is envisioned is not a descent but rather an unveiling, with a removal of the barrier between earth and heaven, like the raising of a curtain.⁵³ The

⁵¹ See also Beale's critique, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 198.

⁵² See Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 163.

⁵³ Beale, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 138–40.

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Greek text of 1 Thess 4:16, however, speaks of Jesus coming down from heaven. As for the meaning of *parousia*, Paul can use the term to mean “presence” (2 Cor 10:10; Phil 2:12) in a non-eschatological context, but he can also use it to mean “coming” in a non-eschatological context (1 Cor 16:17; 2 Cor 7:6–7). The question is how the term is used in an eschatological context like 1 Thessalonians 4.

We must bear in mind that the word already in the Hellenistic period had special associations concerning the arrival of significant persons. When coupled here with the language of coming down, it is hardly likely to mean anything else. In fact, most commentators say that every time this word appears in an eschatological context it means “coming” or “arrival,” and they have the majority of the evidence on their side. As Best says, the word in its primary sense has a sense of movement anyway.⁵⁴ A good example of the usage in a Hellenistic context in connection with an arrival and a greeting of a royal figure can be found in Josephus, *Ant.* 11:26–28 where a priest is awaiting the *parousia* of Alexander in order to go out and meet (*hypantēsis*) him.

We must also keep in view that everywhere else in the NT the term is used in the eschatological sense of the coming or arrival of the Lord/Son of Man (Matt 24:27–39; James 5:7; 2 Pet 1:16; 3:4; 1 John 2:28). E. Best concludes, “The secular significance of *parousia* reinforces the conception of a coming of Christ which is a public event, in which he returns from ‘outside’ history to end history and which therefore eliminates any idea of a gradual development of events within history which themselves share the End.”⁵⁵

It is also true to say that no one spoke of a “Second Coming” before Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 14:8; 40:4; 118:4) in the second century AD, and it is well to remember that the word *parousia* just means “arrival” or “coming.” It does not carry the connotation of “return,” and it is never used of the Incarnation before Ignatius, *Phil.* 9:2. Lastly, it seems clear that the concept enshrined in this term is found in the Aramaic prayer *marana tha*, “come O, Lord” (1 Cor 16:22). We must conclude then that the translation “presence” in 1 Thessalonians 4–5 or elsewhere suits neither the eschatological context nor the history of the use of the term when speaking of “lords” or royal figures, and Paul always uses the term *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians in connection with the term “lord” (2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23).⁵⁶

The theological comfort food of the rapture theology, which lets Christians off the hook when it comes to embracing the gospel message about crossbearing, suffering, and even martyrdom can only be called an offering of the wrong sort of peace, security, and

⁵⁴ See the excursus of Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 349–54.

⁵⁵ Best, 354.

⁵⁶ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 273.

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salvation to those looking for all these things. This whole text makes evident that the general theology of eternal security is not what Paul is offering in place of such a rapture theology either. In Paul's view there are three tenses to salvation: I have been saved, I am being saved, and I shall be saved, and until one gets through all three stages, the situation is, in a word, tense. Apostasy is possible, and Paul warns Christians, not pagans, against this at length in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Paul's view is that one is not eternally secure until one is securely in eternity. But, Paul, while stressing that Christians must persevere in order to obtain final salvation, also promises that God is there keeping them on the right track and protecting them along the way, so long as they are trusting and believing in God.

Paul's message also has ramifications for other sorts of so-called gospels offering false security and salvation. It cuts against the notion that a human government could provide us with lasting peace, for example, through war. Peace through war is as much of an oxymoron as the phrase Microsoft Works. This "peace and national security through war" is what the Roman Empire's rhetoric asserted, and it is what other superpowers assert still. But, alas, as Paul says, politicians will say "peace and security, peace and security," but there is no peace and security to be found in the plottings and machinations of human beings. This happens only with the Prince of Peace. *Pax Romana* in fact meant not peace but rather the pacification and silencing of the enemies, which as collateral damage always involved the silencing of the lambs, the slaughtering of the innocents. Such is the nature of war. The only thing fear-based policies and practices such as Homeland Security accomplishes in the long run is ramping up the anxiety and insecurity in the homeland. It is a constant reminder that we do not have that sort of absolute security from harm.

There is more. Paul, like other early Christians such as John of Patmos, believed that justice should always be left in the hands of God and that in particular the justice issue would be resolved only when Christ returns. There is a reason why so many of the early Christians believed that embracing the gospel of the returning Jesus Christ, the gospel of suffering love, meant embracing nonviolence, turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies, and the like. We can see Paul clearly working out the implications of this in his paraenesis in 1 Thess 4–5 and Rom 12–14. When early Christians quoted the phrase " 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord," this was not said because they were vindictive, like the man muttering "They will get theirs." It was said to remind them that justice should always be left in the hands of God and that the Christian should patiently await the eschatological resolution of such matters when Christ returns and brings in the great and terrible Day of the Lord. I suspect that it is precisely because of the loss of such a clearly theocentric eschatology in our day and age that other eschatologies, whether spiritual or political, have been substituted. The longing for security and peace is deep in

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the human heart, and rather than embrace no hope, false hopes, false eschatologies, and idolatries will be substituted. Those who refuse to drink from the springs of living water will readily turn to the contemporary Kool-aid—Homeland Security.

Lastly, Paul reminds his Thessalonian converts who had already suffered much and probably had endured some martyrdoms, that nevertheless they should not live as people without hope. They could not give way to fear-based thinking but rather had to engage in faith-based thinking of a christological and eschatological sort. They were not to live as people who kept grieving, even for the Christian dead. For not only would their day come when *the* Day came and justice would finally be done on the earth, even more they would receive their life back again at resurrection. In the end it is God's yes to life in resurrection that silences all the fear-based thinking or the dread of death, all the false-security-based thinking based on the fear of losing control. God's yes in resurrection offers the peace that passes understanding. When a nation submits itself to fear-based thinking based in a false and idolatrous gospel of "peace and security," it is a clear sign that it is no longer "one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all."

We conclude with a paraphrase of Jeremiah's warning not to rely on the inviolability doctrine saying "This is the temple of the Lord, this is the temple of the Lord." Similarly, Christians should not rely on an inviolability doctrine saying "I am the temple of the Lord, or I am eternally secure, or I am sealed in the Spirit, or I will escape final tribulation." Instead of placing their trust in and looking for succor and security from a faulty theological idea, they should place their trust in the God who raises the dead and sing "Trust and obey, for there's no other way ..." instead of "Trust in our theology."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Witherington, B., III. (2008). "Homeland Insecurity: The Spiritual Lust for an Escape Clause." *Ex Auditu: An International Journal for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 24, 150–175.