

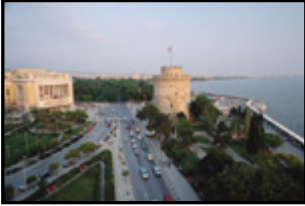
## 1Thessalonians in a First Century Setting

by Kevin A. Beck,

Feb 5, 2006

*1 Thessalonians has been a source for wild apocalyptic speculation. Instead of seeing it predicting events in our future, Kevin surveys the letter in its first-century setting.*

Scholars debate the authenticity of some of Paul's letters. However, his first the Thessalonians to compose "the firstfruits for salvation through sanctification through the Spirit" (2Thess. 2:13). Thessalonian epistle is generally accepted as genuine. This does not mean that there is universal agreement concerning the content and meaning of what he wrote.



Theologians of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation looked into Thessalonians and saw evidence of the medieval Catholic Church. Modern day proponents of dispensational theology find support of a physical rapture, and amillennial theologians propose that Paul wrote about the dissolution of the space-time universe at some undisclosed time in the future. All of these approaches have a common feature—they all see the bulk of 1Thessalonians as being related to yet-future events.

Notwithstanding these popular approaches, 1Thessalonians provides clues for a first century setting—not an open-ended possibility of coming to fruition at sometime in the distant future Paul wrote to his original audience concerning events that he expected to occur within their lifetimes.

What follows is a broad survey of signs in 1Thessalonians that point to a first-century setting for its fulfillment.

### 1Thessalonians 1

- Verse 3, "*remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of or God and Father.*"

Paul opens by commending the Thessalonian church for its faith, hope and love. He would employ this tripartite idiom again in 1Thessalonians 5:8 as an encouragement to the church to hold fast until it received its deliverance. In a later letter, Paul would echo these same three sentiments. We find it in 1Corinthians where Paul links faith, hope, and love to eschatological maturity.

The Corinthian passage informs our understanding of Thessalonians. In 1Corinthians Paul advised the church concerning "spiritual gifts." He warned them that prophetic utterances and tongue speaking would cease "when that which is perfect has come" (1Cor. 13:9). As Paul wrote the letter, he knew "in part." But he expected to experience

the time when he “shall know just as I also am known” (1Cor. 13:12). Significantly, Paul’s anticipation to “know as he was known” suggests that he envisaged being alive when the perfect (telos) would come.

This brings us back to 1Thessalonians 1, which was written a number of years before 1Corinthians. Paul held to the same eschatological hope in each book. In fact, by the time he wrote 1Corinthians his expectation of the end’s imminence had increased (16:22). Additionally, he presumed that the Corinthian church would be alive at the coming (Parousia) of Christ (1Cor. 1:7-8; 7:29-31). So, when speaking of the same faith, hope, and love in 1Thessalonians, Paul believed that the Thessalonian church would be alive to experience the Parousia as well.

- Verses 4-5, “*knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.*”

Here, Paul reminds the Greek church of its divine election, and he links their election to the original occasion of his preaching the gospel to them. Paul had traveled to Thessalonica after establishing the church at Philippi (Acts 17) thereby making it one of the original Greek churches in Macedonia. Thus, Paul considered the Thessalonians to compose “the firstfruits for salvation through sanctification through the Spirit” (2Thess. 2:13). Similarly, he considered the Thessalonians to compose “the firstfruits for salvation through sanctification through the Spirit” (2Thess. 2:13).

Throughout his letters, Paul emphasized his mission to the Gentiles. He connected his apostleship to the Gentiles to his sense of eschatological imminence (Rom. 15:16-21; Eph. 2:19-3:13; Col. 1:24-29). Paul believed that his preaching to the Gentiles was an essential element in fulfilling the Great Commission spoken by Christ. He was to go into the entire world and preach the gospel (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 26:16-18; 1Cor. 9:16). Jesus positioned the promulgation of the gospel into the Gentile world as a precursor to the arrival of the consummation of all things. He also foretold that this would occur within the lifetime of the current generation (Matt. 24:14, 33-34). Paul confidently asserted that he had accomplished this great commission (Rom. 10:18; 16:26; Col. 1:6, 23). By fulfilling his ministry, Paul claimed that the stage was set for the Kingdom of God to arrive in power (2Tim. 4:1, 6-8, 18).

As the firstfruits, the Thessalonian church helped comprise the [Gentile gift](#) that Paul was presenting as “a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:16). Additionally, Paul commended the Thessalonians for their active participation in circulating the gospel to the Gentile world. “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and in Achaia, but in every place your faith has become known” (1Thess 1:8).

When the Gentile mission reached its fullness, the wheels were set in motion for the ingathering of the [entire harvest](#) and the consummation of covenantal transformation (Acts 21; Rom. 11:25).

- Verse 6, *“And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit.”*

Early in this letter, Paul introduces the theme of suffering. He elaborates on it in chapter two where we will observe that Paul links the affliction of the first-century Thessalonians to the great tribulation and eschatological imminence.

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

Paul celebrates the reputation of Thessalonian church. They were known for their conversion from idolatry to the living God. Also, they were recognized for waiting for the revelation of Jesus.

Rather than excoriating them for unwarranted and idle speculation, Paul joins in their expectation. He associates himself with the Thessalonians’ anticipation of being rescued from the “wrath that is coming.” Note the Paul’s use of the personal pronouns “we” and “us” in verses 9-10 and throughout chapter 1. He employs “we” no less than four times, “us” three times, and “our” five times. Paul’s extensive use of inclusive language demonstrates his belief that both he and the Thessalonian church would experience and witness the eschatological deliverance (see also 1Thess 5:4-10 and 5:23). Later, in 2:16, Paul expects eschatological judgment to come upon the Thessalonians’ opponents. To push this expectation 2,000 years or more into the future renders Paul’s relevance hollow.

The Greek words and verb tense indicate Paul’s eager expectation for Christ’s arrival. This is not an isolated incident. Paul regularly expressed his belief in the impending advent of Christ. Two examples illustrate his opinion. “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19). Interestingly, In 1Thessalonians 1:6-10 and Romans 8:18-19, Paul connects eschatological sufferings with his earnest expectation of deliverance. Then in Philippians 4:5, Paul states frankly, “The Lord is near” (Phil. 4:5).

Paul’s statement concerning the Thessalonians echoes back to both John the Baptist and Jesus. John utilized similar phraseology when inquiring of his riverside audience, “Who warned you flee from the wrath to come” (Matt. 3:7). As the eschatological forerunner of

the Messiah, John prepared the way “before the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5).

Likewise, Jesus chided Israel’s leaders for their impenitence. He foretold of the avenging of the prophets that would occur within the lifetime of his contemporaries. “That on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth...Assuredly, I say to you all these things will come upon this generation” (Matt 24:35-36). Jesus continued to weep over Jerusalem. He mourned that they would bear the brunt of the eschatological wrath because of their unwillingness to be rescued from it (Matt. 24:37-39). This stands in stark contrast to the Thessalonians’ hope of rescue.

## **1Thessalonians 2**

- 2:2, “*But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict.*”

Paul spoke of his beating and imprisonment at the Macedonian city of Philippi (Acts 16:16-24). This sort of treatment was not uncommon for Paul. The Book of Acts records several incidents in which Paul faced false accusations, torture, and jail. Paul never shirks from speaking about those episodes in his letters. To the Romans he wrote, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Rom. 8:35). Paul was not merely employing hyperbole to make a point. He encountered all of these threats, and interpreted them as a sign of eschatological imminence.

In a similar manner, he chronicles his beatings, stoning, hazards, and escaping from the governor of Damascus under King Aretas. Significantly, he ascribes to them the meaning of eschatological life and death. He was “always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2Cor 4:10; 11:23-33).

While Paul records his numerous sufferings, he is not complaining. Instead, he affixes them to Christ’s passion. “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church” (Colossians 1:24). This passage may seem shocking. Paul seems to be suggesting that Christ’s tribulation was insufficient, and he (Paul) would make up the difference. It is important to recognize two factors related to this verse. One, Paul is speaking of his mission to the Gentiles (Col. 1:21.) Two, Paul links his suffering on behalf of the Gentiles to the work of Christ (Col. 1:20). As Christ’s ambassador to the nations, Paul suffered in Christ on their behalf and on behalf of the eventual salvation of all Israel (Romans 11:26).

He expands on this theme in 1Thessalonians 3:6-10 where speaks of his “affliction and distress” looking forward to the perfection of their faith.

These sufferings were part of the “great tribulation” spoken of by Jesus. “This is but the beginning of birth pangs. As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because on me, as a testimony to them” (Mark 13:8-9).

Immediately following his discussion of great opposition, Paul echoes Jesus’ language concerning birth pangs. He speaks in parental terms, describing himself as a nursing mother and an encouraging father. This reverberation helps to make a correlation between 1Thessalonians and The Olivet Discourse. This is not a unique instance of birthing imagery in Paul’s writings. For instance, in Romans 8:22-23 he connects birth, the firstfruits, and the new creation. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption.”

Importantly, Jesus foresaw the events spoken of on the Mount of Olives as occurring within the lifetime of his contemporaries. “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things have taken place” (Mark 13:30). Paul’s suffering—along with the suffering of the early Gentile churches—represented the beginning of the end, which would reach its zenith within their current generation. As we will see, the significance of this persecution becomes even more poignant in 1Thessalonians 2:13-3:7. This first century group were the ones who came “out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14). Their tribulation in the first century would culminate in the full arrival of the Kingdom of God.

- 2:12, “*That you would have a walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.*”

This one passage deserves extended comments, but we will limit ourselves to three brief observations.

First, as mentioned in the discussion of 1:9-10, the personal pronouns are important. Paul referred to the Thessalonians’ calling, and he expected them to enter fully into the kingdom and glory. Suggesting that the kingdom’s arrival is in our future negates Paul’s hope by two millennia.

Second, this verse resonates with the prayer of Jesus in Matthew 6:9-13. Generally recognized as an eschatological prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the arrival of God’s kingdom. Integral to the prayer is a lifestyle of forgiveness. Like Jesus’ prayer, Paul’s instructions to the Thessalonians concerning their worthy walk included a reminder to practice forgiveness, “See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone”

(1Thess. 5:15). The Thessalonians' mutual forgiveness involved the existential performance of the eschatological hope of entering into the Kingdom and glory of God. Miroslav Volf explores the theme of forgiveness in his book, [\*Free of Charge\*](#).

Third, Paul often wrote about the glory of God in association with his ministry to the Gentiles. For instance, in 2Corinthians 3:7-4:6 Paul contrasted the Old Covenant with the New. Where the Old contained a passing glory, the New had a remaining glory. The covenantal transformation from glory to glory would conclude with all being transformed into the image of the Lord by the Spirit. Paul then described his role in the process, speaking of his "ministry" (4:1), his "gospel" (4:3), his "preaching" (4:5)—all of which relate to his Gentile mission. He makes similar connections in Romans 15:15-21 where Paul speaks of being a minister to the Gentiles (v.15), the glory of Christ and God (v.17), and preaching the gospel (v.20). As noted above, Paul's Gentile mission related directly to the fulfilling of the Great Commission, thereby creating the circumstances to usher in the consummation of all things—including the kingdom and the glory.

· 2:14-16. *For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews,<sup>15</sup> who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone<sup>16</sup> by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last*

Paul parallels the Thessalonians' suffering with that of the Judean churches. We do not have extensive documentation regarding what the Thessalonian church underwent, but Acts 17:5-9 records Torah-zealous proponents inciting a mob and the city authorities against Paul and the church.

Paul segued from this incident to discussing his Torah-zealous opposition. He criticized them for their participation in the killing of the prophets, his own persecution, and in the crucifixion of Jesus. He accused them of hindering him from speaking to the Gentiles (see Acts 17:5). Their actions contributed to "fill up the measure of their sins, but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost."

This language comes directly from Jesus. In Matthew 23, he rebuked the Torah-zealous leaders of Israel for being the "sons of those who murdered the prophets." He foretold of their eventual demise. Jesus would send them prophets whom they would promptly "kill and crucify, and...scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city." He reprimanded them, "Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt." In their malevolence, "on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth." These events would not occur after a prolonged delay. "Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation" (Matt. 23:31-36). (This forms an interesting contrast to those whom Jesus would save to the uttermost, Hebrews 7:25). Jesus foresaw the official leadership persecuting the Judean churches. Paul (as Saul of Tarsus) not only witnessed it; he participated in it. From this perspective, he could link the Thessalonians' troubles with the Judeans'.

The point is that Jesus and Paul looked to the same horizon. They saw this as happening in the lifetime of their generation.

- 2:17. *As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.*

While this passage does not specifically address eschatology, it provides an interpretive key related to Paul's use of time language.

Paul laments that he had been separated from the Thessalonians for “a short time.” We are not told specifically how short, but we are safe in assuming that it was less than a decade (and certainly less than a centuries or millennia). Additionally, Paul “longed with great eagerness” to become reunited with the church. Stretching out his eagerness to an extended period of time renders his desires hopeless.

So, when Paul speaks in terms of time here in 1Thessalonians, he is communicating in “real time.” This impacts our approach to the imminent sense of eschatological events throughout the letter.

- 2:19-20. *For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!*

Paul anticipated the Greek believers to comprise the crown of boasting that would appear at the coming of Christ. This passage employs the word, *parousia* (presence), to describe the eschatological presence of Christ. In fact, Paul uses it twice in this one verse and three more times in this letter (3:13; 4:15; 5:23).

In all of these cases, Paul states his unambiguous expectation that these Thessalonians would be alive and remain until the *parousia* of Christ.

### **1Thessalonians 3**

- 3:1-4. *Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know.*

Paul had commissioned Timothy to bolster the Thessalonians to persevere through their great tribulation. He had warned them to expect these persecutions, so that they should not be overtaken unawares. This passage is reminiscent of what Paul writes in 2Thessalonians 2:5 concerning the eschatological gathering and the Day of Christ. “Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?”

How did Paul know that they would suffer persecution? Jesus had predicted it in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:9, 21-22). He warned his disciples that this tribulation would herald the Day of the Lord. Importantly, Jesus comforted them by predicting that “for the elect’s sake, those days will be shortened” (Matt 24:22).

Instead of seeing the great tribulation as some distant event, Paul believed it to be occurring in the lives of his Thessalonian audience.

- 3:11-14. *Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

Paul prayed that God would bring him to Thessalonica again. Meanwhile, he prayed that God’s love would thrive in this church. This was not simply a nice wish. Instead, Paul’s prayer was steeped in eschatological significance.

Paul’s hope was that the Thessalonian church was the same hope he expressed for the Ephesians in 4:9-16. Here, he spoke of the church’s servants and their function to strengthen the body “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). Meanwhile, they were to continue “speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:15). They would be established together in love as they awaited the consummation.

Likewise, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to mature in love as they awaited the parousia of Christ. The apostle to the Gentiles expected the Thessalonians to remain until the parousia of Christ. He reiterates his expectation in 1Thessalonians 5:23, “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Moreover, Paul foresaw the Parousia of Christ as happening “with all his saints.” This foreshadows Paul’s statement in 1Thessalonians 4:14, “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” Jude echoes this sentiment when he writes, “It was also about these that Enoch, in



the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, ‘See, the Lord is coming with tens of thousands of his holy ones’ (Jude 14).

Paul anticipated the Parousia of Christ along with his saints to become a reality in the lifetime of the Thessalonians. He looked forward to their blameless presentation at the coming of the Lord. Pushing this expectation into an indefinite future causes Paul’s hope to come up empty.

## **1Thessalonians 4**

1Thessalonians 4 is one of the most hotly contested passages of Pauline scholarship. Instead of offering a detailed interpretation of the theological content, I will simply focus on the question of timing. *When* did Paul expect the event of 1Thessalonians 4 to take place?

- 4:1. *Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.*

I include this verse not because of its eschatological significance, but because of its specific form of address. Paul wrote to this specific set of brothers and sisters. He refers to them as “you.” This is not a generalized “you” directed to all Christians of all time. The “you” relates uniquely to the Thessalonians.

Paul speaks specifically to “you” first-century Thessalonians no less than seventeen times in 4:1-12. So, when he continues writing to “you” in the rest of the letter, he has those same first-century Thessalonians in mind.

- 4:15-17. *For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.*

In addressing the Thessalonians’ concern about those who had “fallen asleep,” Paul assures them that at least some of Thessalonians (and maybe even Paul himself) would be alive at the parousia of Christ.

Like the pronoun “you,” the pronoun “we” does not refer to a generalized “we.” It is not a wide-ranging all people of all time, nor is it all Christians of all time. “We” means Paul

and the first-century Thessalonian church. They were the ones that Paul believed would remain alive until the parousia of the Lord. To emphasize his point, Paul says twice that “we” (Thessalonians and Paul) would be alive at the parousia.

There does not appear to be any textual warrant for extending this beyond the lifetimes of those to whom Paul originally wrote.

- 4:18. *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

Paul apparently intended for this letter to be a comfort to the Thessalonians. They were to take heart in the fact that they would be alive to witness and experience the parousia.

The apostle offers a similar word of encouragement in 1Thessalonians 5:11. “Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

To expand this timeframe beyond the lifetimes of the Thessalonians would render these exhortations void. It would be dangling out false hope to a persecuted people.

## **1Thessalonians 5**

- **5:1-4.** *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, ‘There is peace and security’, then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober*

At first blush, it might appear that Paul hedges his bets. He has spent four chapters telling the Thessalonian church that the parousia would come within their lifetimes. Now he seems to pull back a little. It is as if he says, “The parousia will happen sometime soon, but don’t count on it.”

Upon closer inspection, this passage reaffirms what Paul has been saying all along. Let’s look at three specifics.

First, he suggests that there is no need to remind them of what they already know concerning the times and seasons of the parousia. This is not new information to them. Paul is not backtracking or adding to the message that he had delivered to them previously. (See the section above on 3:1-4) What had he told them before? They would endure the great tribulation and come through victorious.

Second, verse two appears to be the sticking point. No one knows the day or the hour. Therefore, Paul's comments on the proximity of the parousia were open for dispute. However, verse 3 shed light on those who did not know the day or the hour. They were the ones saying, "Peace and safety." They would be overtaken as a thief. These were the same scoffers spoken of by Peter (2Peter 3:3ff) and Jude (Jude 18). These first-century mockers chided the messianic community. They believed that all things (temple services, sacrifices, etc.) would continue as they always had. Yet, Peter and Jude took their mocking as a sure sign that they in that day were living in the "last time" (Jude 18). The transformation of covenant worlds would overcome them as a thief in the night because they had not "trimmed their lamps" (Matt. 25:1-13).

Third, in verse 4 Paul affirms that the Day of the Lord would not overtake the Thessalonians as a thief. They were not of the darkness, but they were sons of light. This theme reappears in Romans 13:11-14 where Paul maintains that the eschatological day was at hand. But how did the Thessalonians know that the Day was quickly approaching? Paul had told them so. For Paul, the persecution of the Thessalonians was a sure sign of the messianic labor pains that signaled the onset of the New Creation (Romans 8:18-22; Matthew 24:8-9).

While their opponents would be surprised at the arrival of the Day of the Lord (just as Jeremiah's opponents were), the Thessalonians were well aware that the time was imminent.

- 5:8-11. *But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

This brief snippet conveys Paul's sense of the nearness of the end in his day in multiple ways.

First, Paul affirms that "we" (he and the Thessalonians) belonged to "the day." Paul employs this language in other places, including Romans 13:11-14 and Ephesians 5:8-16. In both of these passages, Paul asserts his faith that the day was at hand and that it was high time for his original audience to awake from sleep (rising from sleep is language related to resurrection).

Second, in light of the coming day, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to put on the armor of the Lord. He stresses this directive in Ephesians 6:10-20. In this letter, he warns the Ephesians to clothe themselves appropriately in order to "withstand the evil day" that was coming upon them (Eph. 6:13).

Third, in 1Thessalonians 5:9, Paul recaps his belief that God had appointed “us” (Thessalonians and Paul) to salvation through Jesus Christ. Once again, the context suggests that Paul had deliverance specific to them in their setting in mind, and whether *they* were awake or asleep, *they* would live with Christ. Apparently, Paul believed that at least some of them would be awake.

Fourth, the Thessalonians were find comfort in these words. Like 4:18, if this letter did not address their specific concerns and worries, then Paul would have been holding out false hope, and the epistle would be meaningless—to them and us.

- 5:23-24. *May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.*

Paul prayed for God’s peace to sanctify the Thessalonian church. This itself is an eschatological concept.

In Romans 16:20, Paul wrote, “The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” The apostle believed that the God would crush Satan *soon* (within the lifetime of the Roman church), and this would bring about the age of peace (shalom). Then in 2Corinthians 13:11 we find, “Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” The God of peace would bring these believers to their eschatological completion (“put things in order”, NRSV).

Back to 1Thessalonians. Like the churches in Rome and Corinth, the Thessalonians would find the fullness of their peace at the parousia, which Paul affirms they would be alive to witness—spirit, soul, and body.

## **Conclusion**

1Thessalonians is one of Paul’s shortest, yet most disputed, letters. By reading it in its historical context, we can eliminate much idle and even destructive speculation. If Paul saw the tribulation, parousia, and Day of the Lord as being first-century events, then we can explore what it means for us to live in light of those fulfilled realities.

This is more than just a theological or literary curiosity. Seeing 1Thessalonians as integral to the story of covenantal transformation occurring in the first-century, we remove speculation related to what catastrophic future the Bible has in store for us. Instead, we can begin building a world at peace with God and one another.

*Kevin Beck is President of Presence International. He is married to Alisa, and they live in Colorado Springs with their three electrifying children.*