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# THE ESCHATOLOGY OF 1 THESSALONIANS IN THE LIGHT OF ITS SPIRITUALITY

## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the eschatology of 1 Thessalonians from the perspective of its spirituality. It first analyses the way in which eschatology suits and reflects its Thessalonian context and the conversion of the Thessalonians. Secondly, it analyses how past events are presented in light of their final spiritual journey. Thirdly, it describes the present situation in Thessalonica and, fourthly, the future in terms of God's ultimate soteriological and judicial actions for humanity. The article concludes with a discussion of the mystical nature of eschatology and the specific pronouncements about the future transformation of believers.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In his seminal work on spirituality, Waaijman (2002:vii) discusses spirituality as "the jointed process of the divine-human relation which is, formally, a layered process of transformation." With this remark, Waaijman emphasises the relational nature of spirituality, its divine and human aspects as well as its processual and transformational dynamics. In lived spirituality the reality being experienced is reflected in basic words that highlight the important aspects of the relational process between God and man. This includes Biblical motifs such as the fear of God (godliness), holiness, mercy and perfection.<sup>1</sup> These describe the domain of spirituality as a polar tension between God and humanity.

These remarks will form the background for the following discussion of the eschatology of 1 Thessalonians, in particular in terms of its spirituality. The article will analyse the letter in terms of the polar tension between God and humanity, and in terms of the ongoing and unfolding relationship between the Thessalonians and God. It will investigate how the letter speaks of a layered process of transformation and portrays a spiritual journey that reflects a past transformation and the ongoing need for it in the light of the consummation at the end.

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1 Cf. further Waaijman (2002:316).

This analysis will be done because the letter focuses, in particular, on eschatology and furthermore because eschatology plays such an important role in the history of scholarly interpretation of 1 Thessalonians. Scholars often refer to the prominence of eschatology in both the Thessalonian correspondence and Paul's theology in general.<sup>2</sup> The letter contains "the most extensive discussion of the *parousia* in any of Paul's letters" (Malherbe 2000:279).<sup>3</sup> Specific eschatological references in 1 Thessalonians have often been taken out of its context and misused to develop the most bizarre theories on the future of the world and, in particular, on a so-called "rapture" of saints (cf. e.g. 1 Thess. 4:17).<sup>4</sup> Likewise, many exegetical debates are conducted on the interpretation of eschatological remarks in the letter. As a result, the basic role of future expectation in the conversion and especially in the ongoing spiritual journey of early Christian believers in Thessalonica tends to recede into the background. This article therefore investigates the eschatology of 1 Thessalonians, in terms of its function and spirituality, by analysing first how future expectation is firmly grounded in the historical context of the letter before investigating various eschatological perspectives on the past and present, and finally delineating seminal aspects of its future expectation.

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2 For example extensively in Beker (1980; 1990; 1991), Matlock (1996).

3 Richard (1991:44) mentions as a "stark" feature of the letter, its focus on the future, its heightened eschatological tone and its apocalyptic imagery. Dunn (1998:18) thus remarks that

[It is] of major importance to appreciate the sense of eschatological newness which transformed and continued to sustain Paul's theology and not to let it be wholly discounted in favour of theological convictions easier to translate into modern terms. For it was clearly this 'revelation' which formed the new perspective from which Paul would henceforth read the holy scriptures.

4 Wright (2003:215) speaks of the eschatological passage in 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11 as a "spectacular" text that exhibits several of Paul's key beliefs about the resurrection. "The apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is the favorite Rapture proof-text for dispensationalists" (Rossing 2004:175). This dispensationalist reading teaches that Jesus will snatch Christians off the earth before the emergence of an evil Antichrist which sets in motion a seven-year period of tribulation on earth during which the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem and after which Christ will return on the Mount of Olives. Wright (2003:215) refers to the "astonishing literalness in popular fundamentalism" with which the eschatological material is used to depict Christians "flying around in mid-air on clouds."

## 2. ESCHATOLOGY IN 1 THESSALONIANS IN LIGHT OF THE LOCAL SITUATION

This article assumes that 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written for a predominantly Gentile audience in 50/51 C.E. after Paul visited the city on a missionary journey (48-52 C.E.; cf. Acts 16-18 and 1 Thess. 1:9). Paul experienced tough opposition. Jewish groups who were hostile to the Pauline mission followed him to Berea in order to repress the sympathetic reception from local Jews (Acts 17:10-14). As a result, his work came to an abrupt end in Berea. The conversion of the Thessalonians took place under hostile circumstances. They remained exposed to their pagan context, but were also incorporated in the new context of God's family, so that they can be described as a liminal group. They were under severe pressure, being ostracised by their families as they distanced themselves from their previous social practices and lifestyle. In addition, they faced serious questions regarding their new faith after their leaders had to flee their city and unexpectedly faced some setbacks (De Villiers 2003; 2004). This situation explains why Paul first wanted to offer them support when he wrote this letter. His aim is clear from the form of the letter which is similar to ancient paraenetic texts. In their dire circumstances (Malherbe 2000:81-82; 222-223) Paul wants to exhort, comfort, console and support them (e.g. 1 Thess. 4:18), thus guiding them on to their future.

Their circumstances should not be considered too lachrymously. Though they were despondent at times, they also bravely held on to their faith. For this reason 1 Thessalonians was written with a spirit of goodwill, stimulated by reports from Thessalonica that the believers were enthusiastic in their faith and still committed to Paul as their spiritual leader (1 Thess. 3:6). Not only did they remain in the faith, but they also witnessed to the gospel in their immediate context, excelling in their own witness to others (1 Thess. 1:2-8). Paul often confirms them as his co-missionaries in proclaiming the gospel.

This illustrates how the letter is intended to guide a group of believers who were in the process of understanding more of their faith and continue living it. Their commitment to faith had to be supported by instruction and information about what lay ahead. In his letter Paul remains the loving, caring, and instructing teacher who accompanies them on their spiritual journey. He wishes to clarify a wrong eschatological view (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11) and inform them on how their present situation relates to the return of Christ who will effect the consummation for believers and the wrath of God upon the unfaithful (Baarda 1984:32).

When Paul summarises the outstanding characteristics of their life in faith at the beginning of the letter, he does so in terms of the future. He begins his letter, significantly, with a remark about their faith and their loving labour that is linked to endurance "inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:3; cf. also

2:19; 5:8 and further below). While they believe and labour, hope in the future keeps them on their spiritual journey (cf. also 1 Thess. 5:8). Pronouncements on the future are inextricably linked to this situation. This will be confirmed by the way in which Paul speaks specifically about past, present and future events. These will now be discussed in more detail.

### 3. PAST EVENTS WITHIN AN ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The role and nature of the end of times and eschatology in 1 Thessalonians are better understood in view of the past and present spiritual journey of the Thessalonian church. In 1 Thessalonians there is no systematic reflection on or attempts to order past events into a pattern such as, for example, in Luke 1:3 (cf. Acts 1:1-3) or in apocalyptic texts such as 4 Ezra 3:4-27 (cf. De Villiers 1981). Paul is not interested in drawing up historical surveys in which the past is a topic of reflection. The few references to historical events are mostly mentioned as supportive and instructive asides. They are strongly integrated in spirituality.

#### 3.1 Events from Hebrew Scriptures and their relevance to the end time

This letter has few references to the history mentioned in Hebrew Scriptures. Only the killing of the prophets is mentioned and linked to the killing of Jesus and the persecution of Paul to illustrate the deep-seated Jewish hostility to God's work among non-Jewish groups (1 Thess. 2:14-16). It also points to the nature of the end of times and the opposition to God's ultimate deeds. The Thessalonians' oppressors violently resist God's work like many before them and in their time.<sup>5</sup> History paradigmatically reveals how God's actions of salvation elicit resistance and persecution — as Paul explicitly states in 1 Thessalonians 2:3-4. The opposition to God's work was violent and, consequently, the journey into the future as a waiting on God (1 Thess. 1:9-10) has been dangerous. The audience is told that this is an indication of God's judgement on its perpetrators (cf. further below). What God destined for the future is in this instance executed in the present. They need not be despondent about their present fate — as they can learn from past opposition that ultimately it was futile and powerless to stop the work of God.

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5 Baarda (1984:39-41) points out how the past history is used analogically in this instance: Just as Jews in Judea suffered under other Jews because of the gospel, so the Thessalonians suffer under other pagans because of the gospel.

### 3.2 Jesus events in the past and the spiritual journey

Of past Christological events, only the death and resurrection of Jesus are mentioned twice. These are directly linked to the future (cf. esp. 1 Thess. 1:10). To Paul the death and resurrection represent a powerful turning point because it is the resurrected Jesus who will return, whom they await and who rescues “from the coming wrath.” What Jesus did and what he will do at the end have direct consequences in the present. It empowered the Thessalonians to break with their pagan past and to serve and worship the living, true God. This is reiterated and developed later in the letter. In 1 Thessalonians 4:14 the death and resurrection of Jesus have more consequences in terms of salvation. They motivate the belief “that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Paul links belief in the death and resurrection directly to the resurrection of the Thessalonians’ dead compatriots. Thus past events guarantee the believers’ future transformation and that of their loved ones.

As such, a close link is established between Christology, soteriology and eschatology. Past Christological events thus explain and enable what will happen in the present and future. As a result of the eschatological nature of the Jesus events, the Thessalonians are now *waiting* for God’s Son “from heaven” (1 Thess. 1:10). This remark implies first the exaltation of Jesus to heavenly spheres with his resurrection and, secondly, the inextricable link between him and those who wait for him. The ongoing spiritual journey is linked to powerful memories and events. The ongoing faith of the Thessalonians is characterised by a “waiting on Jesus,” that is, their present existence takes on a consistently eschatological nature.

Christological information also illustrates another function of past events. The letter explains the suffering of believers by pointing to the killing of Jesus by the Jews in Judea (1 Thess. 2:14-15). Those who killed Jesus also persecuted Christians in Judea. Paul describes the death of Jesus as murder by his compatriots. In a typological manner the death of Christ is also linked to different groups of followers of Christ such as the Christians in Judea, Paul and the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14). What happened to Christ thus becomes a model for the spiritual journey of later believers. They are in their suffering “imitators of the Lord.” The spiritual journey is a journey through darkness like many others before them and in their time (1 Thess. 5:5). Past events in Christ “foretell” ongoing history as it is realised at the time of the Thessalonians and will, by implication, happen again wherever the gospel is proclaimed. Wherever people embrace the gospel, they must expect hostility and persecution (1 Thess. 1:6). The human condition in the spiritual journey is that of struggle against external forces.

### 3.3 Past events in Thessalonica

The understanding of “past events” should not be restricted to what happened in general in history. 1 Thessalonians contains information about past events in Thessalonica. The letter recalls in great detail past events about the Thessalonians. Most of these historical references are found in the first two chapters of the letter and relate directly to the situation of the Thessalonians during their conversion and its immediate aftermath. Paul finds it important to remind them of what happened, although they themselves were involved.

The past is described from different perspectives. The letter mentions the past in terms of Paul’s proclamation of God’s eschatological action. His ministry as the proclamation of God’s ultimate Word is extensively documented as successful (1 Thess. 2:1, 2) and gentle (1 Thess. 1:10; 2:7), though it was also difficult because of persecution (1 Thess. 2:1-2, 9; 3:3-4). Paul reminds them of how he lived among them as an example of hard work and personal holiness (1 Thess. 1:5-6; 2:9-12). Ultimately the past events illustrate the spreading of God’s word in the last days. The information that Paul organised the visit of Timothy, God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel, to Macedonia is a reminder of Paul’s mission and the eschatological proclamation of the gospel for which God appointed the apostles (1 Thess. 3:2; 2:1-2, 14). They are thus reminded of the divine origins of their spiritual journey which fits into comprehensive, larger eschatological events that are beginning to take place in the world.

The recalling of past events also illustrates the Thessalonians’ positive response to Paul’s ministry and their participation in proclaiming the eschatological deeds of God. They welcome his message as divine (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13). The past reveals the transformative nature of the gospel. The believers gave up idols to serve God (1 Thess. 1:9). They suffered (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14), loved each other (1 Thess. 4:9), but had a faith with an eschatological perspective: They waited for the return of the Lord (1 Thess. 1:10). Their past illustrates their perseverance and the authenticity of their faith. Once again a special aspect of their witness is their involvement in missions (1 Thess. 1:7-8; 2:14). They are not involved in a reclusive, isolated spiritual journey. They are members of the family of God who reach out to others, just as Paul reached out to them. The scope of this is impressive. They have become part of the missionary work, of God’s outreach to the gentile world beyond the traditional boundaries of Judaism.<sup>6</sup> Their faith has become known everywhere (1 Thess. 1:8). They understand that their faith influences outsiders even in its simple, everyday form (1 Thess. 4:12).<sup>7</sup>

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6 The notion of family is seminal for an interpretation of the letter. Cf. De Villiers (2003a; 2003b); also Richard (1991:44); Lambrecht (1994:341 and esp. 321-341).

7 For further motivation of the missionary nature of this reference to outsiders, cf. Lambrecht (1994:352-355).

Their identity, like that of Paul, is determined by the eschatological witness of the gospel to the world. They need to witness to the Gentiles in order that the Gentiles will be saved (1 Thess. 4:15). The God they serve is a God who is reclaiming the whole of creation in a transformative relationship. They can recognise this in their own past events.

#### 4. THE PRESENT FROM AN ESCHATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

To Paul, the present is characterised by both divine and human actions. The present is a time in which God acts salvifically. God (and Jesus) clears the way for Paul's visit to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3:11), witnesses to Paul's ministry (1 Thess. 2:5, 10), tests the heart (1 Thess. 2:4) and calls into the kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:12). God empowers believers to a moral lifestyle in the present (1 Thess. 3:13; 4:1, 8; 5:23). God also wants believers to please God (1 Thess. 4:1), to be thankful (1 Thess. 5:18) and God gives peace (1 Thess. 5:23). God imparts divine power in the Holy Spirit, which stresses the presence of the divine in their lives (1 Thess. 4:8). Paul thus speaks of the present as the end of time in which God is offering salvation and restoration in Jesus. The Thessalonians recognise the work of God (1 Thess. 2:13) in their transformed lifestyle (1 Thess. 1:10).

The actions of God in the present are inextricably linked to those of Christ, which are less prominent, but no less important. Christ provides the authority for Paul's ministry (1 Thess. 4:1-2). Those who convert to the living God, receive salvation through Christ as God' Son (1 Thess. 5:9) and are rescued by him from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:10). The eschatological nature of Jesus' past work is best illustrated in 1 Thessalonians 1:10. The ongoing power of these past events is exhibited in the present in the conversion of gentiles (cf. also 1 Thess. 2:16). He rescues them (participle) from the eschatological wrath.

Of special interest is Paul's remark near the end of the letter about God's will that is expressed in Christ Jesus (1 Thess. 5:18; cf. 4:3). Frame (1946:203) links this remark to the more impersonal reference to the will of God in 1 Timothy 4:3. In this pronouncement Paul elaborates on the divine authority in a way that prevents any inferences that God was inaccessible and the will of God impersonal. He uses his characteristic "pregnant phrase" ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. God's authority

operates in Christ Jesus, thus indicating that the will is distinctively Christian and that Christ in whom God operates is an accessible personal power whose right to command is recognized both by Paul and by his readers (cf. 4:7f.).

This remark is of special relevance, not only in this instance, but also for the rest of the letter. The spirituality of 1 Thessalonians repeatedly links the divine to the person of Jesus. The implications of this are mentioned in Frame's concluding remark on the addition of the phrase εἰς ὑμᾶς (it is God's will "for you"). He notes that this obviously implies that the will of God is directed to the believers, but that it is also to their advantage. "He succeeds in hinting that it is the Christ in the believers who guarantees their ability to execute even this most difficult exhortation." The mystical presence of Christ in the life of believers empowers transformation. It represents the immediate intersection of the divine and the human which enables their spiritual formation. It is a detailed presentation of what was observed in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 where it was remarked that it is God who sanctifies. The present reflects the mystical presence of Christ who guides saints in their spiritual journey towards the end.

The concrete expression of the will of God in Christ is also important: According to 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, the will of God is prominent in the triad of joy at all times, enduring prayer and thanking God for everything. Believers in Christ are transformed into joyful, praying and grateful people.<sup>8</sup> That this is not merely an ideal to strive towards is clear from 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10 where Paul writes about his own gratitude, joy and prayer "in the presence of God" for the Thessalonians. It also illustrates how the present with its experience of God's presence is not merely an individual condition in faith, but also a matter of mutual relationships. The typical triad of the divine-human relationship is also evident in the mutual relationships of members in God's family. Frame (1946:201) notes,

In adding that this will of God operates in Christ Jesus, he (Paul) designates that will as distinctively Christian, the will *of the indwelling Christ who is the personal and immediately accessible authority* behind the injunction (cf.4:7f.) (Secondary italics.)

The spiritual journey of the saints is a journey in the company of the exalted Christ who represents the mystical presence of the divine.

In this letter attention is paid to Paul's ministry with its call for a holy lifestyle. This lifestyle further qualifies the waiting for the Lord's coming as mooted at the beginning of the letter. Paul is concerned to revisit the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3:6, 10), to instruct them (1 Thess. 4:4, 6), to inform them about the dead (1 Thess. 4:13), to support them in their ongoing spiritual journey and to prepare them for the ultimate encounter with the divine. The present is scrutinised in the second part of the letter. Paul calls the Thessalonians to a moral

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8 Cf. Neil 1950:126: "This is... a picture of the transformation that comes over common life when men live in the new relationship of the Kingdom." For a discussion of the referent(s) of the "will of God" in this verse, cf. Malherbe (2000:330). It is clear from 1 Thess. 3:9-10 that this refers to the triad in 16-18.



lifestyle (1 Thess. 4:1). Their sanctification which is God's will contrasts with the immoral and harmful life for which non-believers will be held accountable at the end. "The Lord will punish men for all such sins. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thess. 4:7).

This holy lifestyle of the present is a "life between times" (Johnson 1999:285). Between Christ's death and resurrection and the *parousia*, the Thessalonians are called to live increasingly in Christ in accordance with the apostolic teaching about holiness and in obedience to the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 4:8). The eschatological perspective is clear: They need to be "blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones" (1 Thess. 3:13). The same motif is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 at the conclusion of the letter where Paul summarises the theme of sanctification with the prayer, "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." The letter thus ends on an intensely eschatological note.

Paul's present work among the Thessalonians is thus considered from an eschatological perspective. The present is a time in which the holiness of the future dispensation (when the saints will live with the holy God) needs to be sought and appropriated. It is the time for the ongoing transformation of believers who need to become what they will one day be in God's future dispensation. The present is also the time in which God is acting salvifically in Christ. Paul is consistently eschatological in his presentation of the present.

## 5. THE FUTURE

Before discussing future expectation, a short formal remark is necessary. One specific section in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 focuses extensively on eschatological issues. The passage forms the largest part of the second half of the letter. However, other parts contain indirect eschatological references that appear at focal points in the text and significantly determine its nature. The direct and indirect eschatological aspects of the text together illustrate how deeply eschatology permeates the letter and steers its contents. This will now be discussed in more detail.

The three thanksgivings in 1 Thessalonians (1:2-10; 2:13-16; 3:9-10/13<sup>9</sup>) provide the best example of the careful and subtle presentation of eschatological

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9 The prayer in 3:10-11 is a natural extension of the preceding thanksgiving, even though it is not grammatically connected with it. Together with the thanksgiving it forms the climax of the letter's first half (i.e. 1 Thess. 1-3). Malherbe (2000:211) effectively sums it up, "The prayer is closely related to its context and functions as a transition between chaps.1-2 and 4-5."

material. They have frustrated scholars for a long time, because they contradict epistolary conventions that allow only one thanksgiving in a letter. Because of this form, many scholars argue unconvincingly that some of the thanksgivings must be an interpolation.<sup>10</sup> The exuberance in the three thanksgivings reflect Paul's joy and relief upon receiving the news from Timothy that the church in Thessalonica is doing well (1 Thess. 3:6-10). He overflows with gratitude that his mission was not in vain and that their witness to the gospel continues unabatedly.

From a formal point of view, these thanksgivings are carefully composed. They share basic motifs (with words such as "thank", "word of God", "our word", "not human", "imitators", "persecution", etc.) and culminate with an eschatological pronouncement (1 Thess. 1:2, 10; 2:13, 16c; Sanders 1962:355ff.; Baarda 1984; cf. also further below). While the first thanksgiving ends with a note about the return of Christ who rescues believers from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:10), the second concludes with the contrapunctual reference to the wrath of God that comes upon those who oppose God's work of salvation (1 Thess. 2:16). The third thanksgiving culminates in Paul's prayer that they may be found blameless and holy when Christ returns (1 Thess. 4:1-13).<sup>11</sup> The third thanksgiving appears within the context in which a holy lifestyle is closely linked to the *parousia*. This pronouncement closes the first main part of the letter (1 Thess. 1-3), ending with a remark concerning the need to appear blameless at the *parousia*. This first part of Thessalonians is driven at key moments by references to the divine actions for humanity in the *eschaton* — positively in salvation and negatively as judgement — while it ends with the call for the proper, holy human response to these divine actions through a holy lifestyle. The intersection of the divine and the human in this first part has transformative dynamics. Humanity needs to become holy like the holy God in order to enter God's presence or to avoid destruction at the end.

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10 Cf. Richard (1991) for a discussion of scholars who still question the letter's integrity. Lambrecht (1994:328) writes that the form of the three thanksgivings "in no way" pleads against the letter's integrity. Later on (1994:335) he cautions against reading the thanksgivings in terms of "a compulsory obedience to given genres" and prefers to follow "a more natural procedure" in his own analysis. Cf. also his discussion of relevant material in footnote 62. The point is that one should not let external evidence determine the form and integrity of a letter, especially not where there is no link in the text to such external evidence and, furthermore, the generic model is a reconstruct of contemporary scholarship.

11 Lambrecht (1994:337) remarks that past, present and future are integrally linked in the thanksgivings, although he finds the future element not so prominent. But he does refer to the demand for future growth in virtue and more abundant love, concluding that "above all" there is the eschatological outlook in all three.

In general, 1 Thessalonians reflects the fact that Paul, in communicating with his converts about their spiritual journey, keeps them focused on the ultimate deeds of God. When he speaks of his own ministry, their response to it and their present situation, he colours his speech by framing it with the divine events of the future. Their common spiritual journey is an open one, directed towards the future.

## 5.1 The *parousia* as judgement and salvation

The eschatology of the letter repeatedly focuses on a crucial moment in the history of humanity, that is, the “coming” of Christ (1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:15-16; 5:23). As in the thanksgivings, this eschatological event appears at focal points before new sections throughout the letter, thus stressing its importance. Paul uses the simple term *παρουσία* for this event.<sup>12</sup> As a non-technical term it was used to speak of the presence of gods, people or things (Jn 11:28; Hb. 13:5) or their appearing/coming (e.g. Acts 10:21; 17:6; Lk. 13:1; 1 Cor. 16:17; 2 Cor. 7:6, 7; 10:10; Phil.1:26; 2:12; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8, 9, cf. also Jude 10:18; 2 Macc. 8:12, 5:21; 3 Macc. 3:17). In 1 Thessalonians Paul combines *parousia* with special titles of Jesus in formulaic phrases so that it becomes a technical term. He speaks of the *parousia* of “our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones” (1 Thess. 3:13), of “the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16) and, climactically, of “our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23; cf. Collins 1984:254). Such language indicates that Paul shared this term with his early Christian tradition which spoke about Christ’s return after his exaltation to a heavenly existence since his resurrection. In line with this Paul repeatedly notes that Christ’s return will take place “from heaven.” He thus shares with early Christianity a firm conviction about the imminent return of Christ.

If the death and resurrection of Christ paved the way for the salvation of humanity, Christ’s *parousia* represents a divine intervention that will cause the ultimate and final moment in the history of humanity after which believers will be in the divine presence “for ever.” As such, it represents the total transformation, the entry, at last, into paradise, into the peace of God, the lasting union between the divine and humanity (cf. further below). The spiritual journey of God’s eschatological people as the new family of God is intricately linked to the return of and living with the exalted Christ. This powerful Christ, the “Lord”, determines the nature of the journey. This will now be explained in more detail.

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12 Cf. Oepke (1968), Horsley (1987:167-169) on the differences regarding future expectation in the New Testament.

As was pointed out earlier, eschatological pronouncements in 1 Thessalonians are related to the motifs of judgement and salvation. These motifs are explicitly combined and contrasted in the programmatic 1 Thessalonians 5:9 which states that God destined believers for salvation, not wrath. The future is not about some explosive, cosmic event on its own, but about an event that specifically relates to and affects believers.<sup>13</sup> These two aspects highlight the nature of the spiritual journey.

## 5.2 The *parousia* as judgement

With its teaching about judgement and salvation at the end of time, 1 Thessalonians indicates that the spiritual journey is challenging because it brings about a consummation that is directly related to the response to the gospel and to the way in which believers have been travelling on their journey. Those who hear and respond to the gospel need to have a particular kind of lifestyle for which they will be held accountable. This word is closely linked to judgement that will take place at the Day of the Lord as it was expected in Hebrew Scriptures. The *parousia* is the time when God will punish evil-doers,<sup>14</sup> and when their lifestyle will be scrutinised by God (cf. e.g. 1 Thess. 4:6<sup>15</sup>). The judgement at the *parousia* is viewed from two perspectives — judgement in the future and judgement in the present. The *parousia* has negative consequences for humanity in terms of how it responds to God's actions.

### 5.2.1 Future judgement

The nature of the judgement is illustrated in detail by the motif of God's wrath which appears in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 (εἰς ὀργήν) and 5:9 (ἐκ τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς ἐρχομένης) where it is directly related to God's relationship with humanity. God's wrath is not merely an action of God. God acts in order to transform humanity to serve the true and living God. The image of God's wrath is, by way of speaking, secondary to salvation. The gospel is proclaimed to the Gentiles so that people may be saved and, as a result, rescued from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:10). Those who oppose God's work of salvation will be punished with

13 Johnson (1999:286), in a different context, also correctly notes how eschatological language is not used for its own sake.

14 The motif of God's wrath appears 36 times in the New Testament (e.g. Mt. 3:7; Mk 3:5; Lk. 3:7; 21:23; Jn 3:36; Heb. 3:11; 4:3; Jam. 1:19, 20 and extensively in Rev. 6:16, 17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19 and 19:15). For a full description, cf. Pesch (1990).

15 God is portrayed in Jewish literature as the Deliverer from the eschatological wrath. Paul here ascribes a function of God to Jesus. Cf. further Collins (1984:259).

God's wrath<sup>16</sup> (1 Thess. 2:16; cf. further below). God's wrath is not an arbitrary and indiscriminate force that exists on its own; it has a moral character insofar as it is a response to destructive human behaviour. Punishable sins are linked to the lack of a holy lifestyle (1 Thess. 4:3-8). Sins are not only ethical; they are also visible in opposition to the proclamation of the gospel (1 Thess. 2:15-16), that is, resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit. Those who are punished oppose God and the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 4:8). The letter describes God as the one who "avenges," that is, who punishes those who sin (1 Thess. 4:6; ἔκδικος;<sup>17</sup> cf. Bauer-Gingrich-Danker 1979:238; cf. Rom. 13:4).

Despite the strong language, the description of God's judgement is sober. There are, not surprisingly, few references to it in this loving and supportive letter. 1 Thessalonian contains no elaborate scenes of judgement as in Matthew 24 and Revelation 21, or of the more gruesome pictures in some Jewish and Christian apocalypses (e.g. The Apocalypse of Peter). Nevertheless, Paul does not discard or underplay judgement, as one would have suspected in a context in which pagans regarded anger as a negative act of aggression against others (cf. Cook 2006:514-532; Malherbe 2000:122; Nussbaum 1994:255-256). Even if he does not discuss the wrath of God in detail, it forms an integral part of his expectation of the future. As such he upholds the traditions in Hebrew Scriptures that portray the righteous anger of God as judge and restrainer of evil.<sup>18</sup> Given Paul's Jewish background, this motif suits a letter with a strong focus on holiness.<sup>19</sup> Paul further uses traditional imagery, showing that he was also influenced by his Christian traditions. His view on God's wrath is in line with Synoptic passages that speak about Jesus' wrath and closely identify Jesus with the execution of divine anger in response to the lack of repentance and evil opposition to the divine (e.g. Mt. 4:10; 11:20-24; 13:42; 25:41; 16:23; 22:7; 21:12-13; Mk 1:25, 9:25; Lk. 4:41; Jn 8:44, 11:33, 38). With this call for holiness, he integrates the motif of God's wrath into God's work of salvation and assumes God's righteous judgement where salvation is rejected or obstructed. He seeks to encourage and guide believers to remain in a healing relationship with the divine and to allow the divine work to transform them in the image of God who is the Holy One and who gives the Holy Spirit to them. In doing so, they will follow Paul's example as someone who was holy, righteous and blameless among them (1 Thess. 2:10). The proclamation of the *parousia* is an urgent call to remain and

16 Cf. Nida-Louw (1988:490) who note, "Though the focal semantic element in ὀργή is punishment, at the same time there is an implication of God's anger because of evil."

17 Louw & Nida (1988:490) also place this work in the same semantic domain (punish, reward). Note in this regard 2 Thess. 1:9. This word is a common description of God in the LXX (Frame 1946:154; Malherbe 2000:233).

18 Stählin (1968:431); Malherbe (2000:122).

19 He, e.g., uses it often in Romans (1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 5:9; 9:22).

live in God's salvation in Christ or else face the unimaginable destruction as the consequence of not heeding this call.

There is a uniquely mystical quality in Paul's observations about God's wrath. In 1 Thessalonians 5:3 he writes about the return of Christ that will bring "destruction" (τότε αἰφνίδιος αὐτοῖς ἐφίσταται ὀλεθρος).<sup>20</sup> The word ὀλεθρος is used elsewhere by Paul, but then only in an eschatological context (1 Cor. 5:5<sup>21</sup>). It refers to what will happen at the *parousia* to those who err. Those who are incorporated in Christ and who are prepared will enter into the presence of God at *parousia*, whereas others will face destruction, i.e. exclusion from Christ's presence. This is stated clearly in 2 Thessalonians 1:9: "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed."<sup>22</sup> Rejecting God ultimately results in exclusion from the divine presence. Those who reject God and the Holy Spirit thus sever themselves from a healing relationship with the divine (cf. further below).<sup>23</sup>

## 5.2.2 Realised judgement

It is intriguing to note that Paul does not link the wrath of God exclusively to the future. The spiritual journey does not only come under scrutiny at the end. In the controversial passage, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, God's future wrath is considered to have been realised in the present. The Thessalonians are described as having suffered like the Judean churches suffered from their countrymen who killed Jesus, the prophets and drove Paul out. These persecutors displease God, are hostile to all and oppose the Pauline proclamation. This is followed by the remark ἐφθασεν δέ ἐπ' αὐτοὺς ἡ ὀργὴ εἰς τέλος, literally<sup>24</sup> meaning the

20 Cf. further Stählin (1968:422-447) on wrath in the New Testament and specifically in Paul.

21 In this verse destruction is linked to and contrasted with salvation as well.

22 Note how those who are punished are those who do not obey the gospel. The word is used in 1 Tim. 6:9 together with the equally strong Greek word ἀπώλεια (used in the New Testament as the opposite of salvation in Mt. 7:13; Jn 17:12; Phil.1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess. 2:3, etc.).

23 Lambrecht (1994:430) interestingly writes that while Christians will be made alive in Christ and will be judged for their sins, "nothing is said about the destiny of non-Christians. We must bear with that silence." Cf. also his conclusions on p. 431. Though the text does not mention this specifically, its pronouncements regarding disobedient Christians and its evaluation of gentiles who live immorally and do not know God would not leave much to the imagination. It is indeed noteworthy that Paul's language is not speculative and judgemental.

24 For a discussion of the different versions and translations, cf. Baarda (1984:19-20).

wrath came (aor.) over them until (the) end. The aorist ἔφθασεν is a proleptic aorist in a prophetic context (“has come upon”).<sup>25</sup> It therefore speaks of God’s judgement that is revealed in the lives of God’s opponents.

The bitter opposition of the Jewish groups to Paul’s universal gospel (κωλύοντων ἡμᾶς τοῖς ἔθνεσιν λαλῆσαι ἵνα σωθῶσιν) was, in Paul’s eyes, sinful. His language is strong. Because of their obstructing the Gentile mission they heap up (ἀναπληρῶσαι) their sins to the limit (πάντοτε; 1 Thess. 2:16), or fill the measure of their sins. “They heap up their sins to the limit” theoretically can refer to the preceding list of the Jews’ negative actions, but in this context it relates specifically to their hostility against the Gentile mission. In other words, this phrase should be translated as “by obstructing us to speak to the nations that they may be saved,” the wrath of God has come over them.<sup>26</sup> Those who persecuted God’s people in the past and in the present and who did so in opposition to God’s outreaching love to all people are being held accountable and are being judged by God. The act of their persecution is an indication of God’s judgement now (Baarda 1984:53). Inflicting suffering on others is an indication of living under the wrath of God.<sup>27</sup> Paradoxically, the success of the persecutor is an indication of wrath (Baarda 1984:54). The people of God, claiming to be involved in a spiritual journey with God, are travelling without God and even fall under the judgement of God. Paul’s Jewish opponents are judged, ironically,

25 Cf. Frame (1946:113-114) and Van Leeuwen (1926:336). Malherbe (2000:171, 178-179) concludes, “But Paul now affirms God’s wrath is not deferred; it has already come upon them.” Many futile attempts are made to point towards some historical event that represents the execution of judgement.

26 Paul has nothing else in mind but the eschatological wrath, as is clear from the expressions ἡ ὀργή and ἐπ’ αὐτούς in verse 16. God’s judgement comes from heaven. This is further clear from the crucial phrase in the final position in the sentence, εἰς τέλος. The phrase can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it can indicate a concluding event that follows previous ones so that the wrath of God is said to have “finally” or “at last” come over them. But it could also mean “to the end” (cf. NEB), indicating a decisive event with ongoing future consequences. Then it would mean that the wrath of God has come over them till the end because and insofar as they oppose the Gentile mission. The aorist can then be regarded as a prophetic, proleptic (future) aorist (e.g. Frame 1946:114) or as an ingressive aorist — having begun but still going on. Both indicate, as Baarda observes (1984:56), something definite that will continue for ever, in line with how it is often used in apocalyptic literature. Cf. also 2 Thess. 1:9 which speaks of everlasting destruction; also Rom. 1:18; 2:5, 8 and, e.g., 1 En. 84:4.

27 Cf. 4QpPs 37; 1 En. 5:6v; 91:9ff etc. Baarda (1984:53, 72).

because of their (“pious”) resistance to his gentile ministry.<sup>28</sup> This judgement is explained in another passage in which it is said that Thessalonian believers who piously, but falsely claim peace and security will also face destruction (1 Thess. 5:3).

These Jewish opponents rejected others, regarding them as unworthy of a relationship with God. This is unacceptable to Paul. In his letter he does not promote hatred of others as in Hebrew Scriptures (Ps. 139:21ff.) or in Qumran (1QS 1:10f). In his spirituality there is no place for destroying others. He does not relish or delight in the destruction of others (cf. 1 En. 62:11-12). There are no demands to take vengeance (1 En. 84:6; Ps. 69:25; cf. Baarda 1984:58) and no curses (1QS II:5vv). In 1 Thessalonians 5:15, on the contrary, he asks that no one should repay wrong with wrong, but that saints should be kind to each other — and to all. Paul elaborates on this in Romans 12:19-20 where he speaks of God’s wrath and a Christian lifestyle. He demands from his readers not to take revenge, but to leave room for God’s wrath. God is the One who avenges, who will repay, not the saints. In the spirituality of this letter, the human dimension is firmly distinguished from the divine also in terms of judging. God alone remains the judge and avenger of sins.

### 5.3 The *parousia* and salvation

Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians is viewed from a soteriological perspective — that is, how humanity will finally be brought to its divine destiny. This is expressed in detail in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 where the previous idolatrous existence of the believers is contrasted with their new relationship with the living and true God. Believers hope for future salvation (1 Thess. 4:13; 5:8, 10; cf. 1:3). They differ from their pagan compatriots because of their expectation of the time when Christ will return to share a future existence with believers (1 Thess. 4:16, 17).

There is a close link between future salvation and the past work of Christ (De Villiers 2005:316-319). Jesus, resurrected from the dead, saves the saints from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:9-10).<sup>29</sup> Similarly, 1 Thessalonians 4:14 speaks of Jesus who died and rose again and who will bring with Him those who have

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28 There is no indication in this instance that Paul speaks of the Jewish people as an ethnic or religious group, but only of those who hinder the Pauline proclamation. In this sense it does not contradict his position in Romans 9-11. For a discussion of Romans 9-11 and more literature, cf. Lambrecht (1994:35-54).

29 According to Frame (1946:89), this present participle denotes the function of Jesus as Messiah who delivers or rescues from the not far distant judgement. Malherbe (2000:122) also speaks of “a permanent function with a future application.” It is better to read it proleptically. The Thessalonians know Jesus in the present as their saviour.



fallen asleep in him. Believers receive a new identity in the resurrection of Christ, become part of the family of God and expect the future reunion with those who have died. In 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 past, present and future are presented as follows:

ὄυκ ἔθετο ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ὀργήν  
 ἀλλὰ εἰς περιποίησιν σωτηρίας διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ<sup>30</sup>  
 τοῦ ἀποθανόντος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν,  
 ἵνα εἴτε γρηγορώμεν εἴτε καθεύδωμεν ἅμα σὺν αὐτῷ ζήσωμεν.

A key word in this passage is περιποίησιν, meaning possession, preserving or obtaining/gaining. Malherbe (2000:299) opts for the latter in light of 1 Thessalonians 1:10 which “seem to point to a future deliverance from a future wrath.” In this passage, this future event is inextricably linked to and determined by past events. The use of the traditional formula ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν indicates that Christ brings salvation through his death (cf. De Villiers 2005:319). The death of Christ has soteriological implications for believers.

Future and past events empower the Thessalonians for their spiritual journey under difficult circumstances. In this sense the *parousia* has a transformative effect on the present lifestyle of believers. They hope and persevere until the *parousia*. They are (eagerly) “waiting,” (1 Thess. 1:10),<sup>31</sup> “walking” (1 Thess. 2:12) or “living” with Christ (1 Thess. 5:10) in expectation of the coming of the Lord as saviour and judge (1 Thess. 5:23). Transformed and inspired by the death and resurrection of Jesus that inaugurated the time of the end, their life in the present is now focused on the consummation at the *parousia*. It energises them to live a life pleasing to the Lord (1 Thess. 4:1; cf. Beker 1980:154-155).

This impact of the future upon the present is particularly interesting in terms of its context. Though salvation, presented in apocalyptic categories, is modified and determined by the Christ events, its presentation is also influenced by the local situation. The contingent situation in Thessalonica elicited Paul to reflect on aspects of the Christian *kerygma* about which the Thessalonians required more insight. Their situation in Thessalonica is liminal in the sense that they moved away from a pagan background to become part of a group that formed a new family of God. They are still part of and yet separated from their

30 Note the antithetical parallelism. “The construction highlights the contrast” (Malherbe 2000:299).

31 Malherbe (2000:121) notes that this is a *hapax*, but that it also relates to the eagerly awaited end mentioned in Rom. 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:20. “The tradition from which he derived the words appears to have been influenced by the LXX, where it is used of waiting with faith and full assurance for God’s righteous judgment, mercy and salvation (Jer. 13:16; Isa. 59:11; Jud. 8:17; Sir. 2:6-8).

old, pagan context. They are in between times. Practically this means that they should not be like the Gentiles who do not know God (1 Thess. 4:5); they must be holy and blameless at the *parousia* (1 Thess. 4:13). They should not be like others (οἱ λοιποὶ) who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Paul argues that the dead have not lost out on salvation. Those died in Christ (1 Thess. 4:16) remain in the community of God the Father and of the Son. They are not abandoned. Their relationship with Christ extends beyond the boundaries of death and transcends death. Their existence is essentially affected and transformed long before the final return of Christ.

In fact, in a unique and remarkable way, Paul reveals that the dead have a special status. Those who died in Christ will rise *first* (1 Thess. 4:16). Paul's extraordinary perspective that the dead have preferential status at history's climactic moment is new to traditional apocalyptic thought. Their tragic deaths are transformed into good deaths (Roetzel 1997:103). The salvific nature of Christ's death has implications for understanding the death of believers. Their death is not a tragedy; it should be experienced within the framework of the divine actions in Christ that is transformative in nature — not only of the living, but also of those who die in Christ.

## 6. ENTERING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Some final observations must be made regarding the *nature* of future salvation. The future is occasionally expressed soberly, for example, that it will be “for ever” (1 Thess. 4:17) and then, more tellingly, by the observation that believers will be “in the presence” of God (ἐμπροσθεν τοῦ θεοῦ). The Greek word ἐμπροσθεν is a translation of the Hebrew לְפָנַי and is used in 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2:19; 3:9, 13.<sup>32</sup> Though it can be translated simply as “before,” it speaks more specifically about experiencing God's presence in awe and fear — language that would be in line with the presentation of God as holy and as judge who avenges sins in this letter. In 1 Thessalonians 1:3 Paul writes in solemn language how he keeps the Thessalonians “in the presence of God and our Father.” In 1 Thessalonians 3:9 he speaks of his joy over the Thessalonians “in the presence” of our God. This expression is an indication of a particular awareness of God as a person.

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32 Cf. also elsewhere in the Pauline traditions in Gal. 2:14, 2 Cor. 5:10 and Phil. 3:13 and frequently in the rest of the New Testament. Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker (1958:257) list different meanings, but explain 1 Thess. 2:19 and 3:13 as “in the presence of,” referring to Gen. 45:5.

Paul speaks about experiencing God's presence in the future, as in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 where the presence of God is expressly linked to the *parousia* of Christ in solemn language. Paul wishes the believers to be blameless and holy "in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." The titles, the description of the Thessalonians as holy and the following amen give a special character to this verse and, in particular, to the quality of God's presence. Believers will experience the presence of God as Father. The presence of Christ is powerful — he will be accompanied by all the holy ones.<sup>33</sup>

In the letter Paul expands the future community with the divine to include a community with other saints when he refers to being with the Thessalonians "in the presence of God when he comes" (1 Thess. 2:19). This expectation of sharing the divine presence as a community, as new family of God, brings joy. It will be a "glorious" experience. The future will liberate believers from suffering and bring them into God's kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:12).<sup>34</sup> The word "glory" is an indication of the special nature of the future existence that Paul expects for the family of God (cf. also Malherbe 2000:153). In the Pauline tradition, the nature of glory is impressively discussed in 2 Corinthians 2 and 3 (cf. esp. Neil 1950:44-45). In 2 Thessalonians 2:14 the glory is more explicitly linked to the *parousia* and to Christ. Neil (1950:45) remarks,

Paul thinks of the glory of God as something which is reflected in the Christian life. God's Spirit, transforming the believer into His own likeness, communicates something of Himself, so that the Christian mirrors His glory, inwardly now, outwardly in the spiritual body hereafter ... In the fulness of the consummation, God is revealed in all the majesty of His goodness and Love; and His people, having grown into the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ, are able to live in His Presence for ever. This is the true end of man, the fulfilment of his destiny.

The experience of the divine presence is also expressed by means of participatory prepositions. In 1 Thessalonians 3:8 Paul expresses the close and intimate link between the believers and "the Lord" when he remarks that we really live "in" the Lord (ζῶμεν ... ἐν κυρίῳ). It is in the future, however, that believers will be "with the Lord for ever" (πάντοτε σὺν κυρίῳ ἐσόμεθα) as

33 Frame (1946:139) thinks that the image of the Day of the Lord is in the background of this language. This would intensify the connotation of awe suggested by the use of the phrase "in the presence of God."

34 Van Leeuwen (1926:329) finds a reference to the *parousia* in this instance. More extensively, Neil (1950:45) and Malherbe (2000:153) who suggests quite plausibly that the two terms are a *hendiadys*.

stated in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. There will be no end to being with the Lord.<sup>35</sup> This is developed in more detail in 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 which states that God appointed us to receive salvation through Jesus and that Jesus died for us so that we may live together with him (σύν αὐτῷ ζήσωμεν). This remark about being “with” the Lord is of special significance because it is the culmination of the events at the *parousia* as described in the previous passage (formally indicated by καὶ οὕτως). Paul can be even more intense. In 1 Thessalonians 4:17 he writes that the living will be caught up ἅμα σύν αὐτοῖς, using a stronger formulation than the simpler σύν αὐτοῖς. At the same time he emphasises this by placing it before the verb.<sup>36</sup> According to this verse, the dead and the living will enter into the intimate presence of the Lord.<sup>37</sup>

In this intimate understanding of the future relationship, Paul is once again traditional. Except for the suggestion of the awesome presence of God on the Day of the Lord from Hebrew Scriptures, his language suggests the apocalyptic understanding of the ultimate union with God. Being with God is a leading motif in major Jewish apocalypses (4 Ez. 14:9; 6:26; 1 En. 39:6-7; 62:13-14; 71:16; cf. Malherbe 2000:277). In the Gospels μετὰ is used to convey this meaning (Mt. 28:20; Lk. 23:43; Jn 17:24). Malherbe (2000:277) remarks that Paul always uses σύν (with) “to describe the relationship with Christ after the resurrection.”<sup>38</sup> The best comparable use is 2 Corinthians 4:14, “God who raised Jesus, will also raise us and bring us with you into his presence” (cf. also Plevnik 1999:439, 543). Salvation in the future thus means to be in Christ, in the presence of God, to be intimately linked with the divine.

But the significance of being in the presence of God should also be understood in terms of the divine names linked to it. The letter speaks of the presence “of God our Father” (1 Thess. 1:3; 3:9, 13) and of our “Lord” Jesus (1 Thess. 3:13). These names present a special image of God, especially in a pagan context. It assumes and illustrates a traditional Judeo-Christian image of God and, in particular, the notion of God as Lord (Yahweh). Waaijman (2002:431) writes about the implication of the name Yahwe in Hebrew Scriptures. God is

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35 *The Translator's Handbook to the Bible* notes that this phrase “is in some languages best expressed as “we will always remain with the Lord,” or “... continue with the Lord.” In some instances this may be rendered “we will always stay where the Lord is,” or even “we will always accompany the Lord.”

36 Malherbe (2000:275) also finds that the ἅμα strengthens the σύν and concludes that this strengthening is “at the heart of Paul’s consolation.”

37 “It is a very precious thought, especially to those who have been bereaved, as had some of the Thessalonians” (Morris 1984:144-145). More will be mentioned about the presence of God below.

38 He quotes Rom. 6:8; 8:32; 2 Cor. 4:14; 13:4.

present in an atmosphere of prayer and self-surrender. God is intimately interwoven with human becoming; the sustaining ground of the course of life; the core of the good life; the guiding power to which we must learn to yield; the vital energy which sustains and protects the life of community; the power of love and the source of mercy; our final resting place and ultimate home. God spontaneously participates in human life. He is intimately involved in human love, reveals himself as protective Presence. God is companionately present in every person's life journey; he does not forsake his creatures in the end. The mystical dimension of this god-consciousness consists of the fact that people realize, with trembling awe, that they are totally in God's hand. The entire course of their life is experienced as being shaped and sustained by God (Ps 139).

The solemn description of the "presence of God" is supported by an equally impressive description of God in the rest of the letter. In 1 Thessalonians God is portrayed in images that remind one of Waaijman's remarks. God is the Father (1 Thess. 1:3), the loving God who reaches out and chooses (1 Thess. 1:4; 2:12), who reveals (1 Thess. 1:8), the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9), who helps (1 Thess. 2:2; 3:11), who commissions (1 Thess. 2:4), who tests hearts (1 Thess. 2:4), who judges (1 Thess. 2:16; 4:6), who sanctifies (1 Thess. 3:12; 5:23), who teaches love (1 Thess. 4:9), who cares and saves (1 Thess. 5:9), he is the God of peace (1 Thess. 5:23).

This was how the pagan audience in Thessalonica experienced their faith. They who previously only knew idols as gods and who were bound in darkness to an immoral lifestyle have been saved into God's family of the end of time and were now awaiting the final coming of this compassionate God.

## 7. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF BELIEVERS

Some concluding remarks regarding the contents of Paul's eschatological pronouncements in 1 Thessalonians are needed. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 provides more detail regarding the fate of those who died before the *parousia* (4:13-18), and the Day of the Lord (5:1-11). These issues are directly related to the situation in Thessalonica.

### 7.1 The fate of dead believers

When Paul speaks about the future, he chooses to focus first on the fate of believers in Thessalonica who died before the *parousia* (1 Thess. 4:13-18). The believers in Thessalonica were despondent that those who died would not share in the *parousia*. This threatened their trust in the integrity of Paul's gospel. In his

response, Paul wants to comfort them by sharing with them insights into future events. God will act through Jesus<sup>39</sup> and bring those who have fallen asleep to be with God.<sup>40</sup> They will be brought with God and enter God's presence through Jesus who died and was resurrected.<sup>41</sup> This inspires hope and removes uncertainty about the fate of loved ones. The dead have not been abandoned or destroyed; they are merely asleep "in Christ." The transformation is radical. Those who believe are part of a dispensation that pagans do not share. While they mourn without hope over their dead, the believers celebrate their mystical unity with Christ who transcends even the boundaries of death.

## 7.2 The meeting with the Lord and the transformation of believers

After pointing out the future return of the dead, Paul mentions the relationship of the dead with those who are left until<sup>42</sup> the *parousia* in the rest of the passage (οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι ... εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου; 1 Thess. 4:16 and 17).<sup>43</sup> He describes the present existence of the living, that is, of the believers who have not died, in terms of the future. This reminds one of the earlier description of the believers as waiting for the future return of the Son (1 Thess. 1:10; ἀναμένειν). This discussion is so important to him that he motivates it with a word of the Lord.<sup>44</sup> As mentioned above, according to Paul, the dead will not be disadvantaged in any way. They will rise "first" (1 Thess. 4:16).<sup>45</sup> He thus powerfully addresses the anxiety of the believers.

39 For various interpretations, cf. Frame (1946:170-171); Malherbe (2000:266) and Kim (2002:87) who write about the possible traditional material in this passage, citing as evidence the use of Jesus instead of Christ and ἀνέστη instead of ἐγήγερται. Paul thus offers insights that reflect older traditions.

40 Malherbe (2000:267) suggests that σύν αὐτῷ is to be understood as εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς σύν αὐτῷ. The aim of this gathering is to be with God in God's presence.

41 Cf. also Kim (2002:86) who finds that the salvation is based on Christ's death as vicarious atonement because of the expression that Christ died "for us" in 1 Thess. 5:10. This verse forms part of the frame of the eschatological passage (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11).

42 Contrast with this 1 Thessalonians 2:19 where Paul discusses the time when believers will be in the presence of the Lord Jesus at his *parousia* (ἐν τῇ ... παρουσίᾳ; cf. 3:15; 5:23; Frame 1946:173).

43 The expression is often regarded as related to the idea of the remnant in Hebrew Scriptures and said to be a reflection of Paul's apocalyptic thinking. Cf. e.g. Van Leeuwen (1926:372) and the discussion in Malherbe (2000:271).

44 Malherbe (2000:270-271) discusses in detail the different hypotheses about the word of the Lord and concludes that such reconstructions are more significant for reflection of traditional history than for the exegesis of the text.

45 He reiterates this by adding that "then" the living will join them to be with the Lord for ever (1 Thess. 4:17).

The portrait of God's caring action in Christ for the dead is intensified by his subsequent description of the nature of the resurrection. The *parousia* transforms both the dead and the living. They will leave their earthly existence behind for a new life with God when they will be snatched up in the clouds to meet with the Lord in the air (ἀρπαγησόμεθα ἐν νεφέλαις εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἄερα; 1 Thess. 4:17). Popular rapture thinking<sup>46</sup> with its literal reading of this verse argues that some Christians will experience a rapture from earth to enjoy a heavenly sojourn while the war between believers and evil forces continues on earth.<sup>47</sup> But the very sober language speaks only of a "meeting" beyond their present location, that is, in the divine sphere. It is often said that this meeting (expressed in the Greek word ἀπάντησις) should be read as the technical term for the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary who is escorted into the city.<sup>48</sup> It is doubtful whether such a context really clarifies the text, while there are differences between an ἀπάντησις and this text.<sup>49</sup>

Remarks about space characterise this second section. The reunion takes place above the earth. Christ will "come down from heaven" (1 Thess. 4:16) and the believers will be caught up "in the clouds" to meet the Lord "in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17). These remarks portray a different location to the one that believers will inhabit up to that point. It indicates that their future life cannot be understood as a mere continuation of their earthly existence. It implies a different mode of bodily existence. They will be translated into a divine sphere. In this regard Wright (2003:215) is certainly correct,

The close parallel between 4.16-17 and 1 Corinthians 15.51-2 ... suggests that "being snatched up on the clouds to meet the lord in the air" is functionally equivalent, in Paul's mind, to being "changed" so that one's body is no longer corruptible, but now of the same type as the Lord's own risen body.<sup>50</sup>

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46 The discussion between Cosby (1994) and Gundry (1996) illustrates this matter.

47 Cf. Rossing (2004) for a full discussion and the discussion in the introduction of this essay.

48 E.g. Frame (1946:177); Morris (1982:144-145) and many others.

49 Bruce (1982:102-103), for example, correctly notes that nothing in the text indicates that the Lord continues his journey to earth or returns to heaven. Malherbe (2000:277) also points to several important differences between the *apantesis* theory and the remarks in 1 Thess. 4:17. Morris (1982:144-145) also refers to this possible background, but then notes how the audible and visible signs (1 Thess. 4:16) hardly allow for a secret rapture as is portrayed in rapture literature.

50 Cf. especially Plevnik (1999:545) who interprets this passage in terms of an assumption-exaltation model. The clouds in this passage do not transport Jesus from heaven or shroud God as in theophanies, but take human beings from the earth as in pagan and Jewish assumptions. Normally this only happens with living beings. This problem confronted the Thessalonians when their loved ones died and which Paul is addressing in this instance. Paul therefore stresses that the dead will be raised.

This describes the return of Christ as the great reversal expected at the end. It fulfills eschatological expectations of a new, transformed existence that is associated with the Day of the Lord. Paul refers explicitly to this *ἡμέρα κυρίου* in 1 Thessalonians 5:2. This explains the reference in verse 16 to visible and powerful theophanic signs that herald the Day of the Lord as the radical new dispensation that God will bring about: The Lord returns from heaven (cf. also 1 Thessalonians 1:10) with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God (1 Thess. 4:17).<sup>51</sup> On this day, the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of all things take place. Those who believe in Christ will share in a completely new existence. In his letters, Paul argues along similar lines when he points out that believers will be given a different, exalted new life in the presence of Christ and God (1 Corinthians 15:50-56).

The future transformation should be understood in terms of Paul's description of the dead as *οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ* in verse 16 which refers to the dead who are in Christ and not, as in 1 Corinthians 15:18, the dead who died in Christ. This explains the mystical relationship between Christ and believers that transcends death. It remains after believers die until they are translated into the presence of God in heavenly spheres to remain there with God. To believe is to enter a new space, a new structure and a new dispensation. Faith is to experience the powerful and everlasting presence of God in Christ. Thus, the future transformation of believers follows their transformation that took place in Christ.

These remarks yield valuable insights into the spirituality of 1 Thessalonians. The book refers to the divine-human relationships in terms of a radical transformation. The transformation, effected by the death and resurrection of Christ, will find its consummation in his return. Between these times, the believers need to strive to become holy as God wants them to be and in anticipation of their status in the end.

### 7.3 The spiritual journey as a process (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11).

Paul addresses the issue of "times and seasons" in his other passage on the *parousia* (*περὶ χρόνων καὶ τῶν καιρῶν*; 1 Thess. 5:1). As in Daniel 2:21, the two terms form an *hendíadys* that speaks of a divine order of future events that can

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51 The phrases, all with the same preposition and dative (of attendant circumstances), express the powerful glory of the Lord's return. Frame (1946:174) notes that the last two phrases, joined by an exegetical *καί*, explain the first one, meaning, "At a command, namely, at an archangel's voice and at a trumpet of God."



be recognised by those who have wisdom and insight (Malherbe 2000:288). A close reading of the text reveals its outstanding motifs:

#### A Overfell by the Day of the Lord

<sup>1</sup>Περὶ δὲ τῶν χρόνων καὶ τῶν καιρῶν, ἀδελφοί, οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχετε ὑμῖν γράφεσθαι,

<sup>2</sup>αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἀκριβῶς οἶδατε ὅτι ἡμέρα κυρίου **ὡς κλέπτῃς** ἐν νυκτὶ οὕτως ἔρχεται.

<sup>3</sup>Ὅταν λέγωσιν· εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια, τότε **αἰφνίδιος** αὐτοῖς ἐφίσταται ὀλεθρος ὡσπερ ἡ ὕδιν τῇ ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσῃ, καὶ οὐ μὴ ἐκφύγωσιν.

#### B Prepared for the Day of the Lord

<sup>4</sup>ὑμεῖς δέ, ἀδελφοί, **οὐκ ἐστὲ ἐν σκότει**, ἵνα ἡ ἡμέρα ὑμᾶς ὡς κλέπτῃς καταλάβῃ·

<sup>5</sup>πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς υἱοὶ φωτός ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ἡμέρας.

**Οὐκ ἐσμέν νυκτὸς οὐδὲ σκότους**

<sup>6</sup>ἄρα **οὖν μὴ καθεύδωμεν** ὡς οἱ λοιποὶ

**ἀλλὰ γρηγορῶμεν** καὶ **νήφωμεν**.

<sup>7</sup>Οἱ γὰρ καθεύδοντες νυκτὸς καθεύδουσιν

καὶ οἱ μεθυσκόμενοι νυκτὸς μεθύουσιν·

<sup>8</sup>ἡμεῖς **δὲ** ἡμέρας ὄντες **νήφωμεν** ἐνδυσάμενοι θώρακα πίστεως καὶ ἀγάπης καὶ περικεφαλαίαν ἐλπίδα σωτηρίας·

<sup>9</sup>ὅτι οὐκ ἔθετο ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ εἰς περιποίησιν σωτηρίας διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ <sup>10</sup>τοῦ ἀποθανόντος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν, ἵνα εἴτε **γρηγορῶμεν** εἴτε καθεύδωμεν ἅμα

σὺν αὐτῷ ζήσωμεν.

<sup>11</sup>Διὸ παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους

καὶ οἰκοδομεῖτε εἰς τὸν ἕνα, καθὼς καὶ ποιεῖτε.

There are two subsections in this passage. The first one (A; verses 1-3) focuses on the need to be prepared for the unexpected arrival of the Lord's Day.<sup>52</sup> With this traditional apocalyptic expectation (cf. Lk. 21:34-36) Paul warns against destruction that will befall the unprepared (Lk. 17:26-28). Such remarks could

52 The image reminds one of Luke 12:39, although it is the Lord and not the day of the Lord that is mentioned there.

suggest that there were some false prophets in Thessalonica who “deferred the end, thus lessening the impact of eschatological hope on the Thessalonians’ daily life” (Malherbe 2000:417). In the second subsection (B; verses 4-11) Paul writes about those “children of the light” who are prepared for its coming so that they will not be surprised. Verses 5b-7 define, mostly negatively, their Christian identity (5b), spell out the consequences (6 - to be prepared) and then a reason (7 - the unprepared belong to the night). Verses 8-10 form the antithesis of 5b-7. They explain their Christian identity (8), the consequences (8b) and a self-evident tradition (9). Verse 10b concludes this section and the entire eschatological passage (4:13-5:10; Malherbe 2000:287).

The second and first person personal pronouns that dominate this section (cf. e.g. verses 2 and 4) and the shared motifs of *καθεύωμεν*, *γρηγορώμεν* and *νήφωμεν* are the most important formal indicators of the passage’s coherence, but also of its main point. While those who are falsely reassured about the future face destruction, the believers will be saved. In the Pauline letters salvation is similarly contrasted with motifs such as destruction (most explicitly in Philippians 1:28: ἥτις ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς ἔνδειξις ἀπολείας, ὑμῶν δὲ σωτηρίας, καὶ τοῦτο ἀπὸ θεοῦ), but also with foolishness and death (e.g. 2 Thess. 2:10; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15-16). Frame (1946:182) observes with insight that “the point is not annihilation of existence but separation from the presence of Christ.” To be unprepared is to run the risk of destroying one’s relationship with God. Here the same mystical unity with God is at stake, further confirming the above discussion on God’s presence. In this instance 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is relevant as it states that the disobedient will be punished with everlasting *destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord*.

This watchfulness is often explained in 1 Thessalonians. The letter repeatedly summons Thessalonians to live a holy lifestyle, for example extensively in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. This passage immediately follows 1 Thessalonians 3:13 where Paul expresses the hope that they may be strengthened to be blameless and holy in the presence of God when the Lord Jesus comes with holy ones. Their waiting for the *parousia* requires that they live a God-pleasing, quiet life (4:1, 11), display mutual love (4:10), mind their own business and work with hands. The waiting for the Lord is not to be understood in a moralistic way, though, since Paul emphasises that ultimately God sanctifies the believers (1 Thess. 5:22-23). Watchfulness and sobriety are essential parts of their spiritual journey which expects them to become holy (1 Thess. 5:9-10). Jesus saves believers from the future wrath of God. They must wait for his return (1 Thess. 1:10), but they must learn how they should be walking and pleasing God (1 Thess. 4:1) who is the judge of evil (1 Thess. 4:6).

This characterises the ongoing nature of the spiritual journey of the Thessalonians. Waiting for the Lord implies preparing oneself, while realising that

God remains active even in this preparation for the end. The human and divine aspects remain intertwined. The ultimate transformation that awaits one at the end of the journey is translated into and must be viewed in the present. It is a journey in which believers experience an ongoing transformation amid suffering and temptation (1 Thess. 3:5). It means an inner transformation that has external consequences. It reflects increasing, overflowing love for God and others (1 Thess. 5:12). This has an eschatological aim: The spiritual journey finds its consummation when they will finally become the family of the God of peace and when they will be with the Lord for ever (1 Thess. 4:17).

## 8. CONCLUSION

1 Thessalonians is a letter of joyful appreciation that believers, the majority of whom come from a pagan background, remain strong in the faith at a time when they are experiencing severe suffering (1 Thess. 1:6). They have embraced the Pauline gospel and, in a radical transformation, have turned to the living God (1 Thess. 1:10). They have abandoned their previous pagan beliefs and customs. Practically this implies, for Paul, an ongoing struggle against immorality which characterises the lives of gentiles who “do not know God” (1 Thess. 4:4-5).<sup>53</sup> Paul’s gospel expects holiness from them (1 Thess. 4:7), even if their new exclusive loyalty to the holy God evoked suspicion and alienation from their multi-religious compatriots and opposition from Jewish groups who resented Paul’s mission to the Gentiles (1 Thess. 2:2, 14-16). Their suffering was an indication to Paul and to themselves of what believers should expect from God’s opponents. The polar tension between the divine and human is not restricted to the inner resistance against the gospel and a disciplined, holy lifestyle, but it is also evident in the pattern of hostile opposition to God’s work throughout history in the lives of the prophets, Jesus, the Judean Christians and now the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2:15). Paul therefore could even remark that believers were destined for trials (1 Thessalonians 3:3). Paul reiterates this pattern to them in this letter. The ongoing spiritual journey of the faithful thus speaks of the struggle for an authentic lifestyle in light of both internal and external pressures.

In this context the letter provides insights into their spirituality. The believers lived as the new family of God, with God as loving Father (e.g. 1 Thess. 1:1; 1:9-10; 3:13) who called and supported them, with Christ as Son of God whose death

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53 “Conversion from idols to God,” writes Malherbe (2000:120), was for Paul more than accepting a theological postulate about monotheism. The worshiper of idols has no knowledge of God or has rejected that knowledge and fallen into bondage to the idols, with dire moral consequences (Rom. 1:18-32; Gal. 4:8-9).

and resurrection inspired them to intimate, loving relationships with God and with the “brothers” in faith.<sup>54</sup> They excelled in joyful perseverance and endurance, becoming an example to many other Christian groups in Macedonia and Asia (1 Thess. 1:6-8). Paul belabours their new identity as family of God by his repeated use of the address ἀδελφοί (at least 17 times in this short letter). He uses it to recommend, confirm and strengthen them in their familial care.

It is against this background that Paul’s discussion of eschatology in 1 Thessalonians and its implications for the spirituality of the letter should be understood. It portrays the spiritual journey consistently from an eschatological perspective. Believers are “waiting for the Son of God” (1 Thess. 1:9). This remark, emphasised by its special place at the end of the thanksgiving (Malherbe 2000: 121), characterises the identity of the new family of God as a group of believers who serve the one true and living God, but who are even more so eagerly awaiting the return of the Son whom God resurrected from the dead.<sup>55</sup> They live in order to be blameless and holy at the *parousia* (1 Thess. 4:13; 5:23). Whether they are dead or alive, they live together with Christ (1 Thess. 5:11). Their lives are focused on experiencing the presence of God now but, ultimately, especially at the end.

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54 Meeks (1983:164) developed the social cohesion that such language promotes among new converts who had to experience the rupture of their trusted and familiar social structures as a result of their conversion, when he observed, “Within the immediate task of Paul and his associates ... confession of the one God had as its primary implication the consciousness of unity and singularity of the Christian groups themselves.” Such cohesive dynamics are equally valid for the language about the one God as Father and Jesus as the Son, with believers as family.

55 The Greek word ἀναμένειν is an interesting *hapax*, but it reflects an attitude reminiscent of Romans 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Corinthians 1:7 and Philippians 3:20. Malherbe 2000:121: “The tradition from which he derived the words appears to have been influenced by the LXX, where it is used of waiting with faith and full assurance for God’s righteous judgment, mercy and salvation” (Jer. 13:16; Isa. 59:11; Jud. 8:17; Sir. 2:6-8).

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