

## THE SOURCES OF PAUL'S TEACHING ON THE 2ND COMING OF CHRIST IN 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS<sup>1</sup>

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1 and 2 Thessalonians are among the earliest of Paul's letters. 1 Thessalonians must have been written soon after Paul's first visit to Thessalonica, as recorded in Acts 17:1-9. At the beginning of 1 Thessalonians, Paul expresses his thanks to God for the Thessalonians' response to the message he had brought to them. He says: "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5). He goes on to say, "In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:6). In chapter 2, Paul reminds them of his recent visit (1 Thess. 2:1-12) and speaks of the keen anxiety he felt for them, which was only relieved when Timothy arrived with the good news that the Thessalonians were standing firm in their new-found faith even in the midst of continued persecution (1 Thess. 2:17-3:8).

It is evident that the immediate occasion for the writing of 1 Thessalonians was the arrival of Timothy with this good report. If this is the same event as that referred to in Acts 18:5, the letter must have been written shortly after Paul's arrival in Corinth. The Delphi inscription which mentions that the proconsul of Achaia was Gallio, before whom Paul was brought after a year and a half stay in the city (Acts 18:11-17), enables us to pinpoint the date of the writing of 1 Thessalonians during the early part of the year 50.<sup>2</sup>

Timothy must have brought with him certain questions from the Thessalonian Christians about the second coming of Christ (perhaps in written form<sup>1</sup>), to which Paul replies in his letter. The two questions may be phrased as follows: (1) What about our fellow-Christians who have died? Will they share in the second coming of Christ? (2) Can you tell us when the second coming will take place?

2 Thessalonians must have been written shortly after 1 Thessalonians. The Thessalonians are still undergoing persecution (2 Thess. 1:4). The occasion of this letter seems to have been an unsettling report, based on a letter falsely attributed to Paul to the effect that the day of the Lord had already set in (2 Thess. 2:1-2). Such a letter would hardly have been accepted as from Paul unless Paul had already written

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<sup>2</sup>Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 249.

them a genuine letter. In 2 Thessalonians 2:15 Paul seems to refer to his first letter: "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter."

In both letters Paul frequently refers to his ministry among them and reminds them (as in the preceding quotation) of what he had taught them in person when he was with them. He had foretold the very persecution they were now enduring: "When we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted" (1 Thess. 3:4). He had instructed them how to live lives pleasing to God, especially in matters of personal morality (1 Thess. 4:1-8). He does not need to write to them about brotherly love (1 Thess. 4:9) or about the uncertainty of the time of Christ's coming (1 Thess. 5:1-2), presumably because he had already taught them on these subjects. In speaking of the coming of the man of lawlessness, Paul asks, "Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?" (2 Thess. 2:5). Finally, he reminds them of his own gainful employment when he was with them and of the rule he had given them: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10).

There are four passages in 1 and 2 Thessalonians dealing with the second coming of Christ: 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Thess. 1:3-12; and 2 Thess. 2:1-12. The first passage is introduced by the words, "We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers" (1 Thess. 4:13), an expression frequently used by Paul to introduce teaching which he wishes to emphasize (cf. Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor. 10:1; 1 Cor. 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8). It concludes with an exhortation to encourage one another with these words (1 Thess. 4:18). The second passage begins with "Now concerning" (1 Thess. 5:1) and also concludes with an exhortation to encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11). The third passage is in the form of a thanksgiving to God (which normally follows the salutation in Paul's letters) and it concludes with a prayer that the Thessalonians may be counted worthy of God's calling (2 Thess. 1:11-12). The fourth passage begins "Now we ask you, brothers, concerning ..." (2 Thess. 2:1) and is followed by thanksgiving for their election by God (2 Thess. 2:13-14) and a prayer for encouragement (2 Thess. 2:16-17).

After assuring the Thessalonian Christians that Christ's resurrection is the guarantee that those who have died in Christ will be raised from the dead when he comes again (1 Thess. 4:14), Paul introduces his teaching with regard to the second coming by the solemn statement, "This we say to you by the word of the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:15). Since Paul characteristically refers to Jesus as "the Lord" (cf. 1 Thess. 1:1, 3; 2:15, 19; 3:11, 13; 4:1; 5:9), he means to say here that the basis of his teaching about the second coming is Jesus' own word (cf. the NIV, "according to the Lord's own word").

A similar expression is used in 1 Corinthians 7:10, where in giving instruction regarding divorce Paul appeals to Jesus' teaching on the subject: "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A

<sup>1</sup>Some have argued from Paul's use of *peri de* "Now about," in 1 Thess. 4:9 and 5:1 that Paul is replying to a letter from the church; cf. 1 Cor. 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12. *Ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

wife must not separate from her husband." In the next paragraph Paul says: "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)" (1 Cor. 7:12). The obvious meaning here is that Paul does not have any explicit teaching by Jesus on the matter of the desertion of a Christian wife or husband by an unbelieving mate, as he had on the matter of divorce in general. Again, with regard to "virgins" Paul says: "I have no command from the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:25), meaning that he has no explicit command from Jesus governing this particular situation. It is interesting that the Synoptic Gospels include the teaching of Jesus against divorce (Mt. 5:32; 19:9; Mk. 10:11-12; Lk. 16:18), but they do not include any teaching of Jesus regarding the specific matters which the Corinthians had asked about and concerning which Paul gives his advice in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 and 25-38.

In two other passages in 1 Corinthians, Paul refers to teaching which he had received and passed on to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 he says that he received from the Lord and passed on to the Corinthians certain facts concerning the institution of the Lord's supper. The words of Jesus recorded by Paul are nearly identical with those recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 22:26-29; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:19-20). The use of the verbs *paralambanō* "receive by tradition," and *paradidōmi* "pass on," in this passage is paralleled in 1 Corinthians 15:3, where Paul states that he passed on to them as of first importance what he had also received. As already noted, in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Paul exhorts the Christians at Thessalonica: "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter."

In all of the instances cited from 1 Corinthians, Paul refers to material which is found in one or more of the Synoptic Gospels. We should, therefore, expect that his use of a similar expression in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 would refer to material also found in these Gospels. In point of fact, that is exactly what we do find. It will be the object of this paper to show that the teaching of Paul in this and the other passages in 1 and 2 Thessalonians on the second coming of Christ parallels the teaching of Jesus in the Olivet discourse recorded in Matthew 24-25; Mark 13, and Luke 21. It will endeavor to show that this discourse of Jesus was the primary source of Paul's teaching on the second coming of Christ in these two letters.

There are a number of words and expressions found in these passages in 1 and 2 Thessalonians that are similar to those used by Jesus in the Olivet discourse. These will be discussed in the order in which they occur in the Thessalonian letters.

### 1. The word *parousia*

*Parousia*, the word used by Paul for the second coming of Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1 and 8, is the same word used by the disciples in the question which precipitated the Olivet discourse: "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming (*parousia*) and of the end of the age?" (Matt. 24:3). It is used three times by Jesus in the discourse itself: "As the lightning comes from

the east and flashes to the west, so will be the coming (*parousia*) of the Son of Man" (Matt. 24:27); "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming (*parousia*) of the Son of Man" (Matt. 24:37); and after describing the life of the people before the flood who were unaware that anything would happen until the flood came and took them all away, Jesus adds, "That is how it will be at the coming (*parousia*) of the Son of Man" (Matt. 24:39).

*Parousia* is the only word for the second coming used in the Olivet discourse. It is used only by Matthew. It is also the only word for the second coming used by Paul in 1 Thessalonians. Besides 4:15, it is used also in 2:19; 3:13; and 5:23. Paul uses two other words for the second coming in 2 Thessalonians, *apokalupsis* in 1:7 and *epiphaneia* in 2:8, but each of them occurs only once. He uses *parousia* twice, in 2:1 and again in 2:8.

## 2. The Lord himself

Paul emphasizes in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 that it is the Lord himself who will come down from heaven. In 2 Thessalonians 1:7 he speaks of the revelation of the Lord Jesus in blazing fire. In the Olivet discourse the only time that Jesus uses the word "sign" is when he predicts that "the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky" and people "will see the Son of Man coming" (Matt. 24:30). It is the very Son of Man who had no place to lay his head (Matt. 8:20) who is to come with great power and glory.

## 3. From heaven

"The Lord himself will come down from heaven (*ap' ouranou*)" (1 Thess. 4:16). This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven (*ap' ouranou*) with his powerful angels (2 Thess. 1:7). Jesus said that the sign of the Son of Man would appear in the sky (*en ouranō*) and that people would see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky (*tou ouranou*) with power and great glory (Mt. 24:30). His coming will be as visible as lightning which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other (*ek tes hupo ton ouranon eis hup' ouranon*) (Lk. 17:24; cf. Mt. 24:27).

## 4. The Angels

Jesus will be accompanied by angels: "with the voice of the archangel" (1 Thess. 4:16); "with his powerful angels" (2 Thess. 1:7; cf. 1 Thess. 3:13, "with all his holy ones"). Jesus said that he would send out his angels to gather together his elect from the four corners of the earth (Matt. 24:31; cf. Mk. 9:38).

## 5. The Trumpet

The coming of the Lord will be heralded with a trumpet blast: "with the trumpet call (*en salpingi*) of God" (1 Thess. 4:16; cf. 1 Cor. 15:51). Jesus said that he would send his angels "with a loud trumpet call (*meta salpingos megales*) to gather his elect" (Matt. 24:31).

## 6. The Survivors

Paul speaks of “those who are still alive and are left (*hoi zōntes hoi perileipomenoi*) at Christ’s coming (1 Thess. 4:15 and 17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-52), who together with the dead in Christ will be caught up to meet Christ. Jesus does not refer in the Olivet discourse to those who have died, but he does speak of those who endure (*ho hupomeinas*) to the end (*eis telos*) who will be saved (Mt. 24:13; Mk. 13:13; Lk. 21:19).

## 7. The Clouds

In 1 Thessalonians 4:17 Paul says that we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with the resurrected saints “in the clouds” (*en nephelais*). Jesus predicted that his coming would be in clouds (*en nephalais*) with power and great glory (Mk. 13:26; cf. Mt. 24:30, *epi ton nephelon tou ouranou*, “on the clouds of the sky”; and Lk. 21:27, *en nephelē*, “in a cloud”; cf. also Rev. 1:7 and 11:12).

## 8. To Meet the Lord

Paul states that we will meet the Lord (*eis apantēsin tou kuriou*) in the air (1 Thess. 4:17). The same expression is used by Jesus in the parable of the ten virgins: “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him (*eis apantēsin autou*)!’” (Mt. 25:6).

## 9. The Time of Christ’s Coming

Paul refers (*peri de*) to a matter of concern to the Thessalonians, which they had perhaps written to him about, namely, the “times and dates” (*iōn chronōn kai iōn kairōn*) of Christ’s coming. He says that there is no need for him to write to them about it because they knew perfectly well that the time of the Lord’s coming was unknown (1 Thess. 5:1-2). A different expression, but one with essentially the same meaning, was used by Jesus, “but concerning that day and hour (*peri de tēs hēmeras ekeiēs kai hōras*), no one knows” (Mt. 24:36). Since Jesus introduces this remark by the use of *peri de*, it may very well be that Paul uses these words in 1 Thessalonians 5:1, not because he is replying to a letter from the Thessalonians, but only because Jesus used them.

## 10. The Day of the Lord

Paul says that the Thessalonians know that “the day of the Lord (*hēmera kuriou*) will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2). He uses the same expression in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 in his condemnation of the false report that the day of the Lord had already set in. In both cases, Paul is referring to the time of Christ’s second coming. He refers to the same time in 1 Thessalonians 5:4 when he says that the Christians are not in darkness that the day (*hē hēmera*) should surprise them like a thief. Jesus refers to the time of his coming as “that day” (*hē hēmera ekeiñe*) in Matthew 24:36; Mk. 13:32; and Luke 21:34.

### 11. Like a Thief in the Night

One of the most striking resemblances between Paul's words and those of Jesus is the apostle's statement in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, "For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (*hōs kleptēs en nukti*). Jesus used the illustration of the owner of a house who, if he had known at what time of night the thief (*ho kleptēs*) was coming, would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into (Mt. 24:43). The same expression is used in Revelation 3:3 and 16:15.

### 12. Sudden Destruction

Paul goes on to say, "While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction (*olethros*) will come on them suddenly (*aiphnidios*) ... and they will not escape" (1 Thess. 5:3). Jesus compared his coming with the time of Noah when people knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away (Mt. 24:39; cf. Lk. 17:27, "then the flood came and destroyed (*apōlesen*) them all"). He later warned the disciples against allowing their hearts to be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and anxieties, or that day will come upon them suddenly (*aiphnidios*) (Lk. 21:34; cf. Mk. 13:36).

### 13. Labor Pains

Paul compares the suddenness of Christ's coming to the onset of labor pains (*ōdin*) in the case of a pregnant woman (1 Thess. 5:3). Jesus used the same word to denote the woes that would precede his coming: "These are the beginning of birth pains (*ōdinōn*)" (Mt. 24:8; Mk. 13:8).

### 14. No Escape for the Unprepared

Paul concludes his statement regarding the sudden destruction to come upon people at Christ's coming by saying, "and they will not escape (*ou mē ekphugōsin*)" (1 Thess. 5:3). Jesus urged his disciples to be always on the watch and to pray that they "might be able to escape (*ekphugein*) all that is about to happen" (Lk. 21:36).

### 15. Sons of the Light

Paul goes on to say that the Thessalonian believers were not in darkness that the day of Christ's coming should surprise them like a thief, because they are "sons of the light and sons of the day" (1 Thess. 5:4-5), who are expecting the coming of Christ although they do not know the exact time of his coming (1 Thess. 5:1-2). "Sons of the light" means people who have been illuminated with the knowledge of his coming. Jesus told his disciples on the Mount of Olives, "See, I have told you ahead of time" (Mt. 24:25; cf. Mk. 13:23) and urged them to stand and lift up their heads when the things he predicted began to take place (Lk. 21:28) in contrast to other people who are filled with terror and apprehension (Lk. 21:26).

## 16. Watch

In view of the uncertainty of the time of Christ's coming, Paul urged the Thessalonian Christians to be watchful: "So then, let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert (*grēgorōmen*) and be self-controlled" (1 Thess. 5:6). Jesus repeatedly used the same word to exhort his disciples to be ready for his coming: "Therefore keep watch (*grēgoreite*), because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Mt. 24:42); "Therefore keep watch (*grēgoreite*), because you do not know the day or the hour" (Mt. 25:13); "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!' (*grēgoreite*)" (Mk. 13:37).

## 17. The Danger of Sleeping

Paul urges the Thessalonians not to sleep (*mē katheudōmen*) as others do (1 Thess. 5:6). He goes on to explain that those who sleep (*oi katheudontes*) sleep (*katheudousin*) at night (1 Thess. 5:7). Jesus warned his disciples lest his coming find them sleeping (*katheudonlas*) (Mk. 13:36).

## 18. The Danger of Drunkenness

Paul also urges the Thessalonians to be sober (*nēphōmen*) (1 Thess. 5:6) and explains that those who get drunk (*hoi methuskomenoi*) get drunk (*methousin*) at night (1 Thess. 5:7). Jesus told a parable about an evil slave who during the delay in his master's return begins to beat his fellow slaves and to eat and drink with drunkards (*tōn methuontōn*) (Mt. 24:45-49) and warns the disciples against being weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness (*methē*) (Lk. 21:34).

## 19. Salvation

We who belong to the day are to be self-controlled, putting on faith and hope as our breastplate and the hope of salvation (*sōtēria*) as our helmet (1 Thess. 5:8), for, in contrast to unbelievers, we have been destined to receive salvation (*sōtēria*) rather than wrath at Christ's coming. Jesus said to his disciples who were facing persecution and the spread of wickedness, "he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (*sōthēsetai*) (Mt. 24:13; Mk. 13:13; Lk. 21:19).

## 20. With Power and Glory

In 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10 Paul declares that "at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power (*dunamis*)" God will punish unbelievers by excluding them "from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty (*doxa*) of his strength, when he comes to be glorified (*endoxasthēnai*) in his saints and to be marveled at among all those who have believed." Jesus said that his coming would be "with power and great glory (*meta dunameōs kai doxēs pollēs*)" (Mt. 24:30; cf. Mk. 13:26; Lk. 21:27).

### 21. The Gathering Together of the Saints

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1, when Paul refers to the coming (*parousia*) of Christ, he links it with “our being gathered (*hēmōn episunagōgēs*) to him. According to Granville Sharpe’s rule, when two substantives are connected by *kai* and there is an article with the first and not with the second, the two refer to the same thing. This is the case here. Paul refers to the event that he had described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the *parousia* of our Lord Jesus Christ, at which time we are to be gathered to him. It is the verb from which this compound noun *episunagōgē* is derived which was used by Jesus to describe the action of the angels when he comes: “He will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather (*epiunaxousin*) his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Mt. 24:31).

### 22. The Apostasy

In 2 Thessalonians 2:3 Paul urges the Thessalonians not to let anyone deceive them into believing that the day of the Lord had already set in, because that day will not come until the apostasy (*hē apostasia*) occurs. In Matthew 24:10-11 Jesus predicts that many will turn away from the faith (*skandalisthēsontai*) and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.

### 23. The Antichrist

Paul goes on to say that another event must precede the day of Christ’s coming—the revelation of “the man of lawlessness” (*ho anthrōpos tēs anomias*) (2 Thess. 2:3) or “the lawless one” (*ho anomos*) (2 Thess. 2:8), who is further described as one who opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, who even sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God (2 Thess. 2:4). This person, whose coming is said to be according to the working of Satan in all kinds of miracles (*dunamis*), signs (*sēmeia*) and wonders (*terata*) characterized by falsehood (*pseudous*) and in every kind of evil that deceives those who are perishing (2 Thess. 2:9-10), will be utterly destroyed at Christ’s coming (2 Thess. 2:8). Jesus three times warned his disciples in the Olivet discourse concerning the appearance of false Christs and false prophets: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ’ and will deceive many” (Mt. 24:4; cf. Mk. 13:5; Lk. 21:8); “Many false prophets (*pseudoprophētai*) will appear and will deceive many” (Mt. 24:12); “False Christs (*pseudochristoi*) and false prophets (*pseudoprophētai*) will appear and perform great signs (*sēmeia*) and wonders (*terata*) to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Mt. 24:24). Jesus had already spoken of “the abomination of desolation” standing in the holy place, probably a reference to the temple (Mt. 24:15; cf. Mk. 13:14).



## 24. The Preaching of the Gospel as a Testimony to all Nations

In 2 Thessalonians 1:8-10 Paul had spoken of the punishment that will be brought to those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel (*tō evangelīō*) of our Lord Jesus, and of the glory that will be brought to his holy people who have believed, including the Thessalonian Christians, who had believed the apostles' testimony (*marturion*) to them. In 2 Thessalonians 3:13-14, Paul thanks God for the Thessalonian Christians because God chose them to be saved and called them to belief in the truth through the gospel (*dia tou evangeliou*). In the Olivet discourse Jesus states that the one prerequisite for the end of the age to come is the preaching of the gospel (*to evangelion*) of the kingdom to all the world as a testimony (*eis marturion*) to all nations (Mt. 24:14; cf. Mk. 13:10).

### Conclusions

1. The numerous parallels noted between Paul's teaching on the second coming of Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 and 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2 and the teaching of Jesus in the Olivet discourse as recorded in Matthew 24-25, Mark 13 and Luke 21, point toward the latter as a source, in oral or written form, of Paul's teaching.

2. The close verbal resemblances seem to point to a written rather than an oral source.

3. There is a greater amount of material parallel to Matthew's account than to either Mark's or Luke's, leading to the conclusion that the words of Jesus as recorded by Matthew were the source of Paul's teaching.

4. Even when there are not verbal resemblances, there are resemblances in thought, leading to the conclusion that the source used by Paul may have antedated the writing of the Gospel of Matthew.

5. Since Papias mentions the Logia which he says Matthew composed in Hebrew (Aramaic), which may have been a collection of the sayings and discourses of Jesus, it is an interesting possibility that this was the source that Paul used for his teaching in these letters on the second coming of Christ.