

## 2 THESSALONIANS 1 SUPPORTS AMILLENNIALISM

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2 Thessalonians 1 provides support for amillennialism because the chapter is in tension with all the other major millennial views. We shall consider separately how it is in tension with pre- and midtribulational premillennialism, posttribulational premillennialism, and postmillennialism.<sup>1</sup> As one might expect, none of the global issues connected to 2 Thessalonians 1 is new to the millennial debate. But new angles appear as we consider how the global issues interface with a careful reading of 2 Thessalonians 1 in the context of first-century Thessalonica.

### I. TENSION WITH PRETRIBULATIONAL AND MIDTRIBULATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

Let us begin by looking at pretribulational and midtribulational premillennialism. In both of these views the rapture of the saints and the open appearing of Christ are chronologically distinct. Only the saints see Christ at the rapture, while the visible second coming takes place several years later.

The idea that we have here two chronologically separate events does not easily harmonize with 2 Thessalonians 1.<sup>2</sup>

Let us start with vv. 6-7. They indicate that the revelation (*apokalypsis*) of Christ brings a reversal of status. Those who trouble "you" will be troubled. "You" who are troubled will experience relief. "You" means the Thessalonian Christians. Paul includes himself and his friends by saying "and to us as well." The relief envisioned here is clearly relief from the trouble that the Thessalonian Christians and other Christians are now experiencing at the hands of opponents.

Verse 7 specifies that this relief comes "in the revelation of Jesus Christ from heaven with his powerful angels"—that is, relief comes in connection with this revelation of Jesus Christ. It comes at the time of this revelation

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<sup>1</sup> For useful summaries of the main positions see *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (ed R G Clouse, Downers Grove InterVarsity, 1977), M J Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1977), R R Reiter, P D Feinberg, G L Archer and D J Moo, *The Rapture: Pre, Mid, or Post Tribulational?* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1984)

<sup>2</sup> My argument on this point is substantially the same as Moo, "The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position," in Reiter, *Rapture* 187-188

and as an aspect or implication of this revelation.<sup>3</sup> By implication the Thessalonian Christians should not focus their hopes on expecting relief before the revelation of Jesus Christ. Other passages confirm the general idea that Christians must expect suffering and persecution in this world (1 Thess 3:4; 2:14; 2 Tim 3:1–13; 4:4–5; Acts 14:22; 1 Pet 4:1–5, 12–19).

The time at which Christians experience relief can only be identified with the rapture (as in 1 Thess 4:13–18). Paul expects troubles to continue up until the rapture. And there can be no more trouble for Christians after they have been raptured. Whatever may be the details about the second coming of Christ, the fundamental transition for Christians occurs when the rapture brings them relief from troubles.

Before we proceed further we must briefly deal with one parenthetical difficulty. Living in the twentieth century, we know that the Thessalonian Christians as well as Paul and his friends died before the second coming took place. In actual fact they got a certain “relief” from their troubles at the time of their death rather than at the rapture.<sup>4</sup>

How do we deal with this difficulty? We must remember that even though Paul was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit did not reveal to him or to anyone else the time of the second coming (Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7). Hence Paul speaks as one who might be alive at the time of the second coming (1 Thess 4:15; 1 Cor 15:51). Moreover the Thessalonians knew that some Christians had already died, and more would die if the coming of Christ was still some years distant (1 Thess 4:13–14). Quite properly, Paul did not focus their hopes on the possibility of their coming death but on the certainty of the rapture. Death is but a partial and ambiguous “relief.” The real relief comes with the resurrection of the body (4:13–18; 2 Cor 5:4; 1 Cor 15:51–57). Hence in 2 Thessalonians 1 Paul speaks as one who has his focus on the second coming. If Paul had included technical qualifications about the fact that some Christians might die before the second coming it would distract from the main point. Moreover Paul had already explained this kind of complex qualification to the Thessalonians in 1 Thess 4:13–18.<sup>5</sup> We conclude, then, that 2 Thessalonians 1 applies preeminently to all Christians who are alive at the time of the second coming. But subordinately it applies to all who have died with respect to the body and await the resurrection. They too long for the second coming, as in Rev 6:9–10.

<sup>3</sup> L Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NICNT, rev ed, Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1991) 201 n 25

<sup>4</sup> J F Walvoord (*The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation: A Biblical and Historical Study of Post-tribulationism* [Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1976] 123–124, *The Rapture Question* [rev ed, Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1979] 236–237) concludes on this basis that 2 Thessalonians 1 cannot be about the rapture at all. All of 1 Thess 4:13–18 describes a judgment at the end of the millennium. But he offers no explanation of the word *en in v 7*, which temporally links the description of vv 7b–10 with relief to the Thessalonians.

<sup>5</sup> With the bulk of NT scholarship I believe that 1 Thessalonians dates earlier than 2 Thessalonians. I assume also on the basis of the explicit claims of 2 Thessalonians that Paul is the real author (it is not pseudepigraphal).

With this matter settled we may continue to consider the teaching of 2 Thessalonians 1. The specific language used in vv. 7–10 indicates that this time of relief is the time of the open appearing of Christ. It is “the revelation (*apokalypsei*) of Jesus Christ from heaven with his powerful angels in blazing fire, giving vengeance to those who do not know God.” To an average reader this description certainly sounds like the open, visible second coming. The “revelation” is not just visible to the saints but is a revelation that includes blazing fire for taking vengeance on God’s enemies.

Moreover in the OT the “revelation” or appearing of God is regularly the first event in holy war. God appears in glory and power in order to fight against his enemies (Zech 14:3–4; 9:14–16; Isa 63:1; 66:15–16; Hab 3:3–15; etc.).<sup>6</sup> Vengeance is a consequence of appearing. This same pattern is evident in 2 Thess 1:7–8, where the vengeance issues from the presence of God. God appears with the accompaniments of angels and fire, and according to Biblical expectations the angels and fire are integrally involved as instruments in executing vengeance.

Thus the rapture of the saints, the point at which they are relieved, comes “in” the revelation of Jesus Christ openly. The two events—the rapture and the revelation—are basically simultaneous. They are two aspects of the one revelation of Jesus Christ.

Advocates of pretribulation and midtribulation views have a difficulty here. They may argue that in spite of the strong language of vv. 7–8 we have to do with an appearing of Christ to Christians alone. The description here must relate only to the rapture, not to the open second coming.<sup>7</sup> But in so arguing they pull apart the appearing (which they say is to Christians alone) and the acts of vengeance (which are directed to non-Christians). Such a separation is wholly artificial. God appears to his enemies as an aspect of judging and punishing them. The OT shows the regular theological and causal linkage between the two in its depictions of the day of the Lord.

Even if we grant to pretribulationists and midtribulationists the possibility of such a separation, they have still not escaped all their difficulties. The symmetry in vv. 6–7 indicates that the revelation of Jesus Christ has two sides.<sup>8</sup> The one side involves relief for Christians (the rapture). The other side involves punishment for their opponents. According to pretribulation and midtribulation views, the punishment is the great tribulation itself. But that is not what 2 Thessalonians 1 says. The opponents receive “vengeance” in connection with the blazing fire of Christ’s appearing (v. 8). This vengeance is further defined in v. 9 as “eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” Verse 9 is

<sup>6</sup> Cf e.g. T Longman, III, “The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif,” *WTJ* 44 (1982) 290–307. Note also that Isa 66:15–16 LXX offers one of the significant textual backgrounds for vv. 7–8. Cf C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 226–227, F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (WBC 45, Waco: Word, 1982) 151.

<sup>7</sup> P. D. Feinberg, “Response,” in Reiter, *Rapture* 227, briefly mentions this possibility.

<sup>8</sup> Wanamaker, *Thessalonians* 223–224.

talking about punishment in hell, not punishment in some tribulation period. Note also the linkages between the presence of the Lord in v. 9 and his revelation in v. 7, between the punishment (*dikēn*) in v. 9 and vengeance (*ekdikēsīn*) in v. 8, between "his might" in v. 9 and the "powerful angels" in v. 7.<sup>9</sup> The close linkages make it very awkward to try to distinguish two different stages here. The Thessalonian Christians would surely have understood the description as one unified picture, in agreement with the unified pictures of the "day of the Lord" in the OT.

The chronological unity of the events is further reinforced by the conjunction "when" (*hotan*) at the beginning of v. 10. Verses 9–10 offer us the same symmetrical antithesis as do vv. 6–7. In vv. 9–10 the saints<sup>10</sup> experience relief and vindication, while the wicked experience hell. The two judgments are simultaneous ("when"), just as the reversal in vv. 6–7 involves simultaneous relief for the saints and punishment for their opponents.

In short, the consignment of non-Christians to hell is simultaneous with the relief of Christians in the rapture. There is no intermediate stage of tribulation between the two events.

Therefore the rapture of the saints and the open appearing of Christ take place together. 2 Thessalonians 1 is in tension at this point with pretribulational and midtribulational premillennialism.

Perhaps the best answer to this interpretation is offered by Paul D. Feinberg.<sup>11</sup> He observes that the revelation of Christ in 2 Thess 1:7 could "be understood as the whole complex of events, beginning with the Rapture and ending with the Second Advent." The passage groups together "various phases of end-time happenings. This association of events is not uncommon in prophetic portions."

But then Feinberg has virtually admitted that 2 Thessalonians weaves all the events together. On the basis of 2 Thessalonians 1 the Thessalonian Christians would have understood the second coming as a unified event.

## II. TENSION WITH HISTORICAL PREMILLENNIALISM

Second, let us consider the position of historical premillennialism—that is, classical premillennialism. In this view the second coming is a single unified event. After this one event comes a period of millennial peace and prosperity, during which people still give birth to children and die.

2 Thessalonians 1 creates difficulties for this position as well. It knows of only two classes of people—namely, Christians and their opponents. Technically speaking, in v. 6 Paul speaks only of the persecutors, not all non-Christians.<sup>12</sup> But persecution is only the most virulent form of rejec-

<sup>9</sup> Cf *ibid* 228

<sup>10</sup> "Holy ones" in v. 10 refers to Christians, not angels, as the parallel phrase "among all those who have believed" makes clear E Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New York Harper, 1972) 265

<sup>11</sup> Feinberg, "Response" 227

<sup>12</sup> So Best, *Thessalonians* 262–263

tion of God characterizing all non-Christians (Eph 4:17–19; 2:1–3; Rom 3:9–20). Hence in principle Paul's description applies to the broader group. By v. 8 the description in fact broadened out. Retribution comes to "those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."

In short, at the second coming Christians enjoy eternal glory (v. 10) and non-Christians experience eternal destruction in hell (v. 9). Both destinies are final and irreversible. Moreover we know from other passages that Christians have resurrection bodies that are not subject to death. Non-Christians experience eternal death. Hence there are no human beings left with bodies in a nonfinal state. There is no one who could populate a supposed millennium in order that more children might be born and that some human beings would still experience a later physical death.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, pretribulationists are well aware of this difficulty and use it as an argument against posttribulationist premillennialism.<sup>14</sup>

The absence of any human beings in an intermediate category is not merely an incidental technical difficulty. The whole of the Bible teaches that people are either for God or against him. There is no neutrality in the spiritual warfare described in Eph 6:10–20, 1 John 5:18–21, and Revelation.

The gospel itself is at stake in this issue. The only remedy for sin and spiritual rebellion is found in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. If you are united to Christ, you are redeemed. If you are not so united, you are not redeemed. At the second coming, those united to Christ receive resurrection bodies and those not so united go to hell. There is no third category. There are no people in a no-man's-land in between. Christ is the only redeemer (Acts 4:12). "He who is not with me is against me," he says (Matt 12:30). "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). Hence it is not possible to introduce a hypothetical third category without doing violence to central truths of the gospel.

Posttribulationist premillennialists have commonly suggested on the basis of texts like Zech 12:10–13:1; Rom 11:26; Rev 1:7 that numerous Jews will place their faith in Christ at the time of his appearing.<sup>15</sup> At first blush this theory might appear to offer a useful escape. But there are problems with it.

(1) It is not clear that the theory can be reconciled with 2 Thessalonians 1, since 2 Thessalonians 1 so clearly operates in terms of two categories of people.

(2) None of the verses offered in support of the theory clearly locates a conversion of the Jews at the very moment of Christ's visible appearing rather than before it.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> D Moo briefly contemplates the possibility of a "millennium" without physical death ("Response," in Reiter, *The Rapture* 162) But this sort of situation would either be tantamount to the consummation or would still involve evils that would only be possible through human beings in a nonfinal state

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Walvoord, *Rapture Question* 86–87, P. D. Feinberg, "The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position," in Reiter, *The Rapture* 72–79

<sup>15</sup> So "Response" 163–165, see Feinberg, "Case" 73–79

<sup>16</sup> In Rom 11 26 the word *houtōs* is a well-known barrier to understanding v 26 as teaching that the conversion of the Jews is chronologically subsequent to the completion of the salvation

(3) Neither these Biblical passages nor others contain a hint that would encourage us to break down the fundamental dichotomy between the saved and the lost.

(4) No passage in the NT encourages us to introduce the pastorally dangerous idea that the final appearing of Christ opens a "second chance" for salvation rather than the termination of the time of salvation. Hence if Jews are saved through Christ they enjoy the same privileges as all the saved—namely, resurrection bodies at the coming of Christ.

### III. TENSION WITH POSTMILLENNIALISM

Finally, let us consider postmillennialism. Postmillennialism says that, through the gospel, allegiance to Christ and Christian obedience will gradually spread through the world until the great majority of people are Christians. Societies and their institutions will be progressively conformed to the will of God, and an era of great peace and prosperity will ensue before the second coming.

In my opinion, it is possible that this sort of thing might happen. In fact, because I am awed by the power of God for salvation in the gospel (Rom 1:16) I am optimistic about the future. Christ may return very soon, but if he does not return in the next hundred years we may see a great harvest for the gospel. Some other amillennialists display the same optimism.<sup>17</sup>

What, then, is the difference between this sort of "optimistic amillennialism" and a full-blown postmillennialism? Is there any significant difference at all?

2 Thessalonians 1 helps to indicate one difference that remains. 2 Thessalonians 1, I claim, asks us to focus our hopes on the second coming of Christ, not on a hypothetical millennial prosperity taking place before the second coming. The rest of the NT has a similar focus. Thus in my mind the main issue separating contemporary amillennialists and postmillennialists is not the issue of mere possibility—that is, the issue of what might possibly happen if Christ's return is still some decades away. Rather, the issue is whether Biblical promise and prophecy invite Christians to focus hopes on such a millennial possibility. Is such a prosperity the main focus of prophetic expectation, and is it a certainty guaranteed by prophecy? Postmillennialists say yes, and on that basis they expect confidently that the second coming is still quite a long way off. Hence they find it theologically inappropriate and psychologically impossible to focus their most urgent, immediate hope and expectation primarily on the second com-

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of the Gentiles Zechariah 12 10–13 1 involves a description that seems to involve events of the whole eschatological era, from the first to the second coming of Christ Revelation 1 7, as a reuse of the language of Zechariah, does not clearly contemplate salvation of the mourners but rather their discomfiture

<sup>17</sup> Cf R B Gaffin, Jr, "Theonomy and Eschatology Reflections on Postmillennialism," *Theonomy A Reformed Critique* (ed W S Barker and W R Godfrey, Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1990) 201, 208, 210

ing. In contrast, premillennialists and amillennialists think that the second coming is the next main event in God's plan for history. It may be very soon, and they hope and pray for the Lord's coming.<sup>18</sup>

Now consider 2 Thessalonians 1. 2 Thessalonians 1 is in tension with postmillennialism, insofar as postmillennialism wants to focus hopes on a coming millennial prosperity. The text of vv. 5–7 indicates that Christians may continue to expect trouble for a while. They are to anticipate relief from the second coming, not merely for a coming time of millennial prosperity, as postmillennialists would have it.

(To be sure, persecutions come and go, as can be seen in the history of the northern kingdom of Israel as well as in the book of Acts. Christians may sometimes have a measure of "relief" when persecution subsides or when it takes more "civilized" forms like ridicule. But the focus for our hope, according to 2 Thessalonians 1, is on the second coming. Whether the troubles vary in form or whether Christians may at times expect to be in a numerical majority is from a theological point of view a matter of merely secondary interest.)

Some postmillennialists have endeavored to escape the implications of 2 Thessalonians 1 by postulating that 2 Thessalonians is actually describing the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 rather than the second coming.<sup>19</sup> According to David Chilton and some other contemporary postmillennialists, not only 2 Thessalonians but most of the other NT passages that have traditionally been understood as describing the second coming are in fact describing the fall of Jerusalem. The language is figurative rather than literal. Chilton applies a similar procedure to 1 Thess 5:1–9.<sup>20</sup> But he believes that 1 Thess 4:13–18 and 1 Cor 15:51–58 are about the second coming.<sup>21</sup>

We cannot enter into all the details of Chilton's system at this point. But we claim that this kind of approach cannot reasonably be sustained in dealing with the Thessalonian letters. 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is about the second coming. 1 Thessalonians 5:1–10, which is right next door to 4:13–18, must also be about the second coming. Hence 2 Thessalonians 1, which builds on 1 Thessalonians, is also about the second coming. Nothing in either letter has any real tendency to point in a direction different from this understanding.

Chilton and others like him can find what they want in the Thessalonian letters only because they first read in what they afterwards read out. But their interpretations disintegrate once we try steadfastly to put ourselves in the shoes of the Thessalonian Christians. Paul only stayed in Thessalonica for a few weeks (Acts 17:1–10). Moreover, even though Paul had

<sup>18</sup> But the issue of future hope is not the only issue involved in the differences among millennial positions. We are also concerned with whether present time already manifests the exaltation of Christ, inaugurated eschatology, and the beginning of the end. See Gaffin, "Theonomy" 197–224.

<sup>19</sup> So D. Chilton, *Paradise Restored: An Eschatology of Dominion* (Tyler: Reconstruction, 1985) 120.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 119–120.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 147.

talked to them about the second coming (2 Thess 2:5), the letters show that the Thessalonian Christians were confused. They did not completely grasp even relatively basic matters of eschatology. The Thessalonians did not already have a mastery of some esoteric eschatological system.

Now Paul understood the situation of the Thessalonians and their capabilities. Paul would not have used language in such a way that the Thessalonians would almost surely misunderstand.

Once we understand the level on which Paul must communicate to them, it follows that 1 Thess 4:13–18 is about the second coming. The transition in 5:1 is not violent. Hence the Thessalonians will understand the “times and dates” of 5:1 as the times and dates regarding the events associated with the second coming. Hence 5:1–10 is about the second coming.<sup>22</sup>

Next, 1 Thessalonians is the main background for 2 Thessalonians. In view of the sustained concern for the second coming in 1 Thessalonians, the Thessalonian Christians are bound to understand 2 Thessalonians 1 as a continuation of the same topic. The question is not whether one can invent an interpretive scheme, such as Chilton’s, capable of interpreting the whole passage figuratively. The question is whether the Thessalonians have any significant clues that would lead them to turn away from what from their point of view is the most obvious meaning.

In short, there is no escaping the fact that from the standpoint of the Thessalonian Christians 2 Thessalonians 1 is “obviously” about the second coming. Paul knew the capabilities of the Thessalonians and did not intend to confuse them. Hence Paul was actually talking about the second coming.

Chilton has one further argument:

Clearly, Paul is not talking about Christ’s final coming at the end of the world, for the coming “tribulation” and “vengeance” were specifically aimed at those who were persecuting the Thessalonian Christians of the first generation. The coming day of judgment was not something thousands of years away.<sup>23</sup>

Chilton, from his secure vantage point centuries later, knows that the second coming was thousands of years away. Hence Paul could not be referring to the second coming. But unfortunately for Chilton’s interpretation, neither Paul or the Thessalonians had the same knowledge that Chilton now has. Neither Paul nor the Thessalonians knew how far away the second coming might be. For all they knew, they might be alive when the Lord returned (1 Thess 4:15, 18; 1 Cor 15:51). Hence it is perfectly appropriate for them to look forward to the second coming as the time of vengeance and

<sup>22</sup> Chilton (*ibid* 119) wants to make 1 Thess 2 14–16 into a background for understanding 5 1–10, but his appeal to 2 14–16 is very weak. For one thing, 2 16 is a notoriously difficult and obscure verse. It may possibly refer to the fall of Jerusalem, but it may just as easily be a general reference to the hardening of the Jews, along the lines of Rom 11 8. Moreover the immediate context of 1 Thess 4 13–18 is decisive for the way that 5 1–10 will be understood. 1 Thessalonians 2 14–16 is too remote and too lacking in prominence for the Thessalonians to be aware of a salient connection.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid* 120



vindication. Chilton's interpretation works only by projecting his later standpoint onto the Thessalonians. It is quite evident from the nature of Chilton's argument that he has not put himself in the shoes of the Thessalonians. He has not engaged seriously in grammatical-historical exegesis.

Moreover, from the point of view of first-century Christians, regardless of whether we want a short time or a longer time for Christ's second coming the fundamental judgment takes place at the second coming, not merely at death or through some earlier historical calamity or blessing. Hence the principle that Paul expresses in 2 Thessalonians 1 is valid not only for the Thessalonians of the first century but for all Christians who are undergoing persecution.

#### IV. HERMENEUTICAL LESSONS

Curiously, a dispensationalist like John Walvoord<sup>24</sup> and a postmillennialist like Chilton show similarities here. Both appeal to the fact that the second coming did not take place in the first century, in order to invalidate the reference of 1:7-10 to the second coming. Both interpret 2 Thessalonians 1 within a complex, fully articulated eschatological position, with little regard for the question of whether the Thessalonian readers were as sophisticated as they.

The manner of argument here alerts us again to the problems that all of us confront with regard to circularities in Biblical interpretation. It is easy for all of us to assume that Paul and the Thessalonians held beliefs exactly like our own. That is, we postulate that the apostle Paul had taught the Thessalonian Christians exactly what we ourselves happen to believe. Granted that postulate, we then presume that the Thessalonians knew what we know. Knowing what we know, the Thessalonians naturally understood Paul's letter in the same way that we do. Hence 2 Thessalonians means exactly what we already knew it meant. Hence it confirms our point of view.

Unfortunately such an argument is circular. What is the final result of using such a circle? However strained or odd our modern interpretation may be, we can still assure ourselves that the understanding by the Thessalonians matches our modern interpretation. After all, the Thessalonians knew what Paul really meant because they could place his teaching into a framework already well established by his oral teaching (which was naturally the same as our own modern view).

The postulate that the Thessalonians had a sophisticated, complete framework seems attractive because it helps protect our modern positions. But it is dangerously circular and, I believe, improbable in the light of the Thessalonians' confusions and Paul's short stay at Thessalonica.

<sup>24</sup> Walvoord, *Rapture Question* 235-245.

## V. RETURNING TO THE RAPTURE QUESTION

These hermeneutical observations have relevance for 1 Thess 4:13–5:10 as well as for 2 Thessalonians 1. How so?

All agree that 1 Thess 4:13–18 concerns the rapture. Pretribulationists and midtribulationists have usually thought that 5:1–10 concerns the “day of the Lord,” which includes both the great tribulation and the open second coming. On their view there are two or more chronologically distinct events here. If indeed we could separate two or more distinct events by means of these passages in 1 Thessalonians we would at least have some basis for claiming that the Thessalonian Christians already understood pretribulationism when they received 2 Thessalonians. 2 Thessalonians 1 would then be confusing to the Thessalonians but might not overthrow their previous view.

But the idea that 1 Thess 4:13–5:10 deals with two chronologically separate events has problems of its own. In interpreting these verses we are in danger once again of assuming that the Thessalonian Christians had knowledge of a complete system before they received Paul’s letter. For example, can we indeed assume that the Thessalonians would already have been familiar with the modern dispensationalist distinctions between two stages? Or would they have operated instinctively, as a modern dispensationalist does, with a clear-cut distinction between tribulation (broadly conceived) and the great tribulation? Would they self-consciously distinguish between being removed from the tribulation versus being preserved and protected as they passed through it? Would they have seen a word like “wrath” (5:9) as an allusion to the tribulation in distinction from final judgment? Unless they are aided by a complete eschatological system, do they really have clues to tell them that 1 Thess 4:13–5:10 concerns two successive events rather than two aspects of a single event?

In this article I cannot explore in detail the interpretation of 1 Thess 4:13–5:10, but we should be aware that some of the same hermeneutical circularities may crop up there as well as in 2 Thessalonians 1.



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