

# 1 Thessalonians

## 1:1–10

### **Paul's Address, Thanksgiving, Prayer, and Reflection on His Visit**

#### **Address, Thanksgiving, and Prayer (1 Thess. 1:1–6a)**

#### **Introduction and Overview**

The greeting and salutation in 1 Thess. 1:1 bears the name of Paul and his co-workers Silvanus and Timothy. Paul is not a lone missionary-pastor, but exercises a collaborative ministry alongside others. A number of writers have recently

called attention to this fact, especially Ollrog (*Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter*), Bruce (*The Pauline Circle*), and Harrington (“Paul and Collaborative Ministry”).

Paul omits any chosen authoritative title, standing alongside his readers or hearers in friendship. The writers modify the merely conventional greeting-form, which is used in Greco-Roman literature, combining the traditional Hebrew greeting *shālôm* (*peace* or *well-being*) with the traditional Greek greeting *chairein* changed to *charis* (*grace*). In v. 1 they speak of the readers as “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Neil Richardson (*Paul’s Language about God*) shows how closely Paul related Christ with God theologically, and Larry W. Hurtado (*One God, One Lord; Lord Jesus Christ*) has shown how very quickly Christians associated Christ with God in Christian devotion. Thus v. 1 sets out a potentially Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesiological theology.

Many modern scholars refer to “a thanksgiving form” as a regular feature of Greco-Roman letters (O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul*; Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul the Letter Writer*, 55–64). Thanksgiving can be found among Paul’s contemporaries (Philo, *Special Laws* 1.211; *De Plantatione* 130; Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1), and in other Greek-speaking Jewish writers (Wis. 16:28; Sir. 37:11; 2 Macc. 1:10–11); and in non-Christian writers of the second century (*Corpus Hermeticum* 13.18). In 1 Thess. 1:2 the thanksgiving melts or merges into the body of the letter, as it does in Phil. 1:3. But this thanksgiving is warm and affectionate, not merely conventional. For example, Paul addresses the readers as “brothers” (or NRSV, “brothers and sisters”). This was an early term for fellow Christians, and it is repeated in this Epistle some 13 times as an address. It suggests warm affection and solidarity with the readers. They establish new bonds in a new community.

Paul typically begins his letter with *prayer*, which becomes a repeated theme, and which he promises to offer constantly, as a caring pastor. *Faith*, *love* (v. 3), and *election* (v. 4) become key words in Paul, and *faith*. Further, *election* remains forceful, anticipating Rom. 8:33, “God’s elect,” and 16:13, “Rufus, chosen in the Lord.” Election may seem offensive to some modern readers, as constituting an attack on human freedom, but Paul’s point is that the validity of the readers’ faith does not rest ultimately on their own determination. This theme pervades the biblical writings, including God’s choice of Noah (Gen. 6:8; 8:1; 9:9); of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:15; 15:18; 17:7); of Jacob (Isa. 41:9); of Israel (Isa. 41:8; 43:10); of Israel in Paul’s thought (Rom. 11:5, 28); and of the church (Rom. 8:33; 1 Cor. 1:28; Col. 3:12).

Ben Witherington argues that whereas the *Exordium* (vv. 2, 3) is often rhetorically distinct from the *Narratio* (vv. 4–10), here “the *exordium* flows naturally into the *narration* ... in vv. 4, 5” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 52). In epideictic rhetoric there is some repetition because it amplifies its themes. But even if Paul sometimes follows rhetorical procedures, writers tend to see the epistolary genre and theological content as more important than rhetorical

forms. The phrase “not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit” (v. 5) also becomes a typically Pauline one (1 Cor. 2:4–5; 4:20; 2 Cor. 13:3–4; 1 Thess. 3:13). Karl Barth expounds this Pauline theme in *The Resurrection of the Dead* (17–20). *Affliction* (v. 6, Greek, *thlipsis*) is frequent in the LXX. It occurs in Paul in 2 Cor. 1:4–6, Phil. 4:14, Rom. 12:12, as well as 1 Thess. 3:3, 7 and 2 Thess. 1:4, 6. The contrast “humiliation . . . glory” became a regular one in Paul.

*Imitators* (v. 6, Greek, *mimētai*) occurs in Paul in 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Eph. 5:1; and 1 Thess. 2:4. Antoinette Wire and Elizabeth Castelli argue that Paul’s language about imitation imposed an authoritarian and manipulative rhetoric upon the Pauline communities. Castelli appealed to Michel Foucault’s notion of disguised power for particular comparison with 1 Cor. 4:15–16 and 11:1–16 (*Imitating Paul*, 89–117). But this would undermine Paul’s claim that “our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery” (1 Thess. 2:3), reducing it either to a cynical lie, or to gross self-deception.

Jauss seeks from reception history evidence of a stable continuity of interpretation, as well as examples of provocation. The themes of co-workers, Paul’s lack of an authoritative title, the association of Christ with God the Father, the affectionate thanksgiving, and the importance of the typically Pauline themes of faith, love, and prayer all demonstrate continuity with traditional readings. By contrast, inferences from “imitation” and speculation about rhetorical form present tensions between the present and the past.

## The Apostolic Fathers and the Patristic Era

**Ignatius** (c. 35–c. 107) expresses thanksgiving to God in letters (*Epistle to Philadelphians* 6.3; ANF 1.83; *To Smyrna* 10.1; ANF 1.91; *To Ephesus* 21; ANF 1.58).

**Clement of Rome** uses “grace and peace” from God in his letter (c. 96) (*1 Clem.* 1.1; ANF 1.5). **Polycarp** (c. 69–c. 155) comments that Paul wrote letters to enable the readers “to grow in the faith . . . accompanied by hope, and led by love” (*Letter of Polycarp* 3.2–3, Greek and English, Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 1.286–7; ANF 1.33; see 1 Thess. 1:4).

**Justin** (c. 100–c. 165), an early apologist, adopts a similar approach (*Dialogue with Trypho* 41.1, 3; ANF 1.215; *1 Apology* 65.3; ANF 1.185). **Tatian** (2nd century) urges that thanks are ever due to God (*Address to the Greeks* 20; ANF 2.73).

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) links faith with hope (v. 3): “Hope is based on faith” (*Stromata* 2.6; ANF 2.353). He connects faith with hope and love, as Paul does here (*Stromata* 2.12; ANF 1.359). The so-called Liturgy of St. Mark, the Liturgy of the Church of Alexandria, offers “praise, . . . adoration, and thanks giving” to “the Father and the Holy Spirit . . . for evermore” (*Liturgy of St Mark* 3; ANF 7.560).

**Origen** (c. 185–c. 254) comments on 1 Thess. 1:1: “Paul not only says what he says through grace, but he also prays for grace to be given to his hearers”

(*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 9.2.6; FC 104.200). Elsewhere he observes that three made a symphony or harmony when Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy gave instruction by letter to the Thessalonians (*Commentary on Matthew* 14.1; ANF 10.495). He notes: “Through this, he [Paul] is showing that where two or three were found as one, the Holy Spirit had elicited one sense between them and one speech . . . They say and think one thing” (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 10.7.6; FC 104.270–1). Commenting on the “Christianization” of Paul’s form of greeting, Origen also sees how Paul “can clothe the great ideas in common language” (*Against Celsus* 3.20; ANF 4.471). Origen insists that prayer must be offered to God the Father through Christ, and, referring to 1 Thessalonians, adds that this is prompted by the Holy Spirit (*On Prayer* 12.2). Citing Paul, Origen observes, “Having begun with praise, it is right to conclude the prayer by ending with thanksgiving” (*On Prayer* 33.6).

**Basil the Great** (c. 330–379) refers to the close association of the three co-workers to illustrate his concern for the co-equality of the Holy Trinity, when the three in both cases work together with one purpose. The threefold *Gloria* was especially important to Basil (*On the Spirit* 25.58; NPNF2 8.36–7; and in *Letters*, 210).

**Ambrosiaster** (probably d. c. 380) writes that the three mentioned in the salutation and thereafter might seem to be overseers or bishops (*episcoporum*) in name, but the sense and the words are apostolic (*Ad Thessalonicenses prima* 212). Paul always gives thanks for the readers. He expounds “hope” as looking for the coming of the Lord. The Holy Spirit works “in much fullness” and power, and is no delusion, but shows “God’s superabundance of grace” (213).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) observes about Timothy that Paul wrote: “I have no one like-minded, who cares truly for your state” (Phil. 2:20); but adds that Paul places Silvanus before Timothy (*Homily on 1 Thessalonians* 1; NPNF1 13.323). Chrysostom notes, “Here, he [Paul] gives himself *no title*, not “an Apostle,” not “a servant,” I suppose because the men [the readers] . . . had not yet any experience of him” (323). He comments that this epistle ranks probably as Paul’s earliest. Hence he declares: “It is probable that there were few, and they were not yet formed into a body” (324). Moreover, Paul addresses not simply *any* assembly of people, but those who are characterized as *Christians*. Hence, Chrysostom observes, they are in God, as “applied both to the Father and the Son” (314). He prays that the church of his day may also deserve such a title. Chrysostom speaks of Paul’s thanksgiving “for their great advancement” and “good conduct,” which issues in faith, love, and hope (vv. 2, 3, 6). He notes that hope is linked with steadfastness or patience, because the Christians at Thessalonica accept suffering. He writes, “If thou believest, suffer all things; if thou dost not suffer, thou dost not believe” (*Homily* 1; NPNF1 13.324). Labor is involved in genuine love, just as faith shows itself in works. He alludes to Acts 17:5, 6, where Jason exposed himself to danger for Paul and his co-workers, as

part of a work of love. Chrysostom's remarks on preaching illuminate our understanding of "not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit" (v. 5). Preaching, he maintained, *constituted no light matter, and certainly not the rhetoric of flattery, but is characterized by the power of God*, by readiness to undergo immediate persecution; and by a response which pointed to the Christians' election and to their assurance and joy in the Holy Spirit. Here he refers to Acts 5:41, where the apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Christ (*Homily 1*; NPNF1 13.325).

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) speaks of the readers' election and effective signs of the Spirit. He observes how Paul conveyed the message of the gospel, not only through the spoken word, but also showing miracles and great glory by the power of the Spirit. He also notes how in the midst of their tribulations, Paul places the readers on the heart of God by his unceasing prayer (*Ad Thessalonicenses* 1.4). **Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430) refers to the perfect love (*caritas*) of God in Christ, which can sustain the readers patiently on account of their future hope (*Expositions*, 418).

**Macarius** (4th–early 5th century) was the author of four collections of homilies, and expounded Messalianism. This partly Syrian and later Egyptian movement, which endured to the seventh century, held that humankind is inhabited by demons, who could be expelled only by a radical experience of the Spirit and prayer. They appealed to such passages as 1 Thess. 1:5 on "power and the Holy Spirit, and much assurance."

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) points out that Paul accompanied Silas in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea (Acts 17:10). Theodoret understands *grace (gratia)* in its fullest theological sense to imply *salvation* in the Lord (*In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, 2.107). Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon* demonstrates how rapidly "grace" (Greek, *charis*) assumed its full and multiform theological meaning (1514–18). Theodoret notes on Paul's thanksgiving (v. 2), "We are taught first to give thanks for the good things that have come our way, and thus to leave till later requests for what is lacking" (108).

## The Medieval Period

**Bede the Venerable** (c. 673–735) refers to Augustine on Paul's contrast between the church and the synagogue. The apostles always called their Christian gathering a church, to distinguish it from a gathering (*congregatio* or *synagōgē*) of the Jews. The Latin *convocatio* usually denotes the church. He writes, "Even flocks are "gathered," while "assembled" is used of those who employ reason, as do human beings" (*Excerpts from the Works of St. Augustine*, 285).

**Rabanus Maurus** of Mainz (c. 780–856), poet, teacher, and pupil of Alcuin, repeats Augustine’s and Bede’s comment to the effect that Paul “never says ‘synagogue’ but always ‘Church’” (PL 112.541). He refers to the readers’ full *election* to the complete faith, confirmed with the power and signs of the Holy Spirit, issuing in their labor, their patience, and even their suffering (541–2). He declares: “After this faith, then, learn to have firm hope which draws our spirit to things invisible and ingrafts our attention upon the heavenly and eternal . . . In every time of deep tribulation we ought to run with hope to the consolation of the higher piety . . . We especially exhort you to take care to have love in you and show it by action in all things. Without this no man will see God” (*Five Sermons*, 308–9).

**Lanfranc of Canterbury** (c. 1010–89) gives only a brief comment, and repeatedly quotes Ambrosiaster. He notes, as Chrysostom does, the absence of such a title as “apostle,” and his praise for the readers’ faithfulness in the face of opposition. Paul gave thanks for their election and that their discipleship provided a model for others. The Holy Spirit was active among the readers (PL 150.331).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) observes, “The Apostle . . . does not mention his title, but supplies only his humble name” (*Commentary*, 5). He also writes, “[Paul] adds the names of two persons who have preached to them with him: Silvanus, who is Silas, and Timothy . . . as is mentioned in Acts 16” (5). Thomas pointed out that Paul’s thanks are directed to God, not to people, because “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above . . . from the Father of lights” (Jas. 1:17; *Commentary*, 6). Paul gives thanks for them all. Like Chrysostom, Aquinas notes the triad of faith, love, and hope. Faith is the starting point (see Heb. 11:6, “Whoever would approach God must believe that he exists . . .”), but it issues in good works, for “Faith apart from works is dead” (Jas. 2:26). Patience is related to sufferings, as is the case with Job (Jas. 5:11). Election is a source of thanksgiving.

Aquinas comments further that election underlines the absence of personal merit: “Though you did not merit this election, rather you are freely chosen by God.” The kingdom of God comes with power, as in 1 Cor. 2:4 and 4:20 (*Commentary*, 7). The role of the Holy Spirit reflects Peter’s preaching in Acts 10:44. Aquinas gives cross-references to Acts, 1 Corinthians, Hebrews, and James. Aquinas sees this close association of the Father and the Son as pointing to “the faith of the Trinity and the divinity and humanity of Christ.” The Holy Spirit is implied as the bond between the Father and the Son (*Commentary*, 5).

In the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas includes extensive sections on faith (2.2, qu. 2–7), on hope (2.2, qu. 17–22), and on love (2.2, qu. 23–33). He writes, “Expectation is . . . the symbol of faith . . . An act of hope presupposes an act of faith” (2.2, qu. 17, art. 6, ad 2). An act of love is more than friendship, for it is

“for God’s sake” (2.2, qu. 23, art. 1). Genuine charity could undo the bad effects of cupidity (2.2, qu. 23, art. 2). Aquinas also writes, “Charity is love, not all love is charity” (*Summa Theologiae* 1.2, qu. 62, art. 2). “We must look for the perfection of the Christian life in charity” (2.2, qu. 184, art. 2). Nevertheless Aquinas and the Reformers agree that election implies God’s sovereign, unmerited grace. Virtually every Christian writer agrees with Thomas’s comment: “Love (*caritas*) is at the center of every virtue” (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2, qu. 151, art. 2). He adds: “No one is silly enough to suppose that divine activity is prompted by our deserving” (1, qu. 23, art. 5). He cites Paul in Rom. 9:13, and Augustine on Matt. 20:1–16. God’s will, he said, is the reason for salvation (1, qu. 23, art. 3).

Also in the thirteenth century the **Béguines** owed much to Bernard and to “The Seven Degrees of Love.” **Hadewijch** of Antwerp, from the Béguine movement, has been credited with writing:

Ah! sweet Love, I would that I were love,  
And loved thee, Love, with love itself!  
Ah! sweet Love, for love’s sake grant  
That love may wholly know her love.

**John Huss** (1371–1415) similarly urges faithfulness, as Paul urged the Thessalonians (*On Simony* 6, p. 247). At the conclusion of this work he brings together “our faith, hope, [and] love” (*On Simony* 10, p. 278). **Nicholas of Cusa** (1401–64) writes, “Two things only hast thou taught, O Saviour Christ – faith and love. By faith the intellect has access to the Word; by love ‘tis united thereto; the nearer it approaches, the more it waxes in power; the more it loves, the more it establishes itself in its light” (*On Learned Ignorance* 3.9, 11, in Petry (ed.), *Late Mediaeval Mysticism*, 381). **Desiderius Erasmus** (c. 1467–1536) asserts that “Faith is the sole door to Christ.” This is “the first rule” (*Enchiridion* 8, in Spinka (ed.), *Advocates of Reform*, 322). He continues, “With all your heart fixed . . . let your faith rest . . . Let nothing move you” (322).

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) understands faith primarily as a personal appropriation of grace. He distinguishes it from belief (*credere*). To believe seems “an easy thing to many people . . . But . . . such faith is human, like any other mental activity of man . . . James calls faith of such a kind ‘dead faith’ . . . It is faith about God, not faith in God” (*Epistle to the Hebrews* 209, in *Early Theological Works*, 16). Genuine faith comes “from grace” (210). The biblical accounts of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the Judges show this (210–25). It is said of all the

believing saints that they were “found faithful” (226). In his *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* (1522) Luther declares: “Faith is a living, daring, confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life upon it a thousand times. This confidence in God’s grace . . . makes men glad and bold and happy . . . Hence a man is ready and glad, without compulsion, to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything in love and praise of God, who were shown him this grace” (*Luther’s Works*, 35.370–1; also in Luther, *Selections*, 24). This readily explains why faith in 1 Thess. 1:3 leads to Paul’s reference to the readers’ labor of love and steadfastness of hope in the face of persecution or oppression (v. 3).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) comments that Paul introduces himself “without any title of honour,” because the Christians in Thessalonica “acknowledged him to be what he was” (*Commentary*, 17). He further comments that Paul cites “others along with himself, in common with himself, as the authors of the letter” (17). Calvin finds this passage of special interest. In reaction against a quasi-mechanical view of apostolic succession, widely perceived at the Reformation as implied in Catholic theology, Calvin insists that “a true and lawful church . . . is to be sought only where God presides and Christ reigns” (17). Like others before him, he noted that Paul’s praise and thanks are directed to God, but added that this prevents the sense of “congratulations” to the readers, as if to “puff them up with pride.” On the other hand “a recognition of the gifts of God humbles pious minds” (18). God manifested in this church “the gifts of the Spirit.” Faith is a special token of the power and efficacy of the Holy Spirit, and “in the cultivation of love they have not scorned trouble or labour” (18). Endurance and patience characterized their reaction to afflictions, persecutions, and suffering (as in Rom. 8:25). Calvin noted Paul’s rejection of pretense: “All mere pretence must vanish when people come into the presence of God” (19). As we might expect, he saw the good Christian character of the readers as “evidence of a sure election” (19, on 1 Thess. 1:4).

The power of the Holy Spirit, Calvin comments, enabled the readers to have a “deep conviction” about the truth of the gospel, and to see it confirmed “by solid proofs” (20). But against the left-wing Pietists of the Reformation, Calvin did not understand “power” as miracles, but as including “right doctrine.” Similarly he rejected the notion that there is “no eternal predestination of God that distinguishes between us and reprobates” (20). To suggest this is to undermine grace, which points to “gratuitous election” (20). Calvin pressed this further in his comment on the joy given by the Holy Spirit in v. 6. This teaches us that “it is not by the instigation of the flesh, or the promptings of their own nature that men will be ready and eager to obey God; this is the work of God’s Spirit” (21). The threat of severe suffering shows that they were not intimidated by the fear of the cross.



Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* broadly confirm the themes of his *Commentary*. He comments explicitly on Paul's gospel as "not in word, but in power" (1 Thess. 1:5; *Institutes* 4.1.6; tr. Beveridge, 2.287). The context of chapter 1 was "Of the True Church," and article 6 states that a church's ministry is effective, provided that the Holy Spirit remains active within it. He has said that "by the faith of the Gospel Christ becomes ours" (4.1.1; 280). "The corruptions of the Papacy" seek to add more conditions for a true church. But the elect are joined together as Paul sets it out in 1 Thess. 1:1–6. Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but God, who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:7). Hence we cannot confuse the mixed, visible church with the pure, "invisible" church (*Institutes* 4.1.7–15; tr. Beveridge, 288–94).

**William Estius** (1542–1613), Catholic chancellor of Douay, repeatedly draws on other patristic or Catholic commentators, and compares various manuscript readings. Like Chrysostom, he notes Paul's absence of title, and follows Cajetan in suggesting that this is due to his deference toward Silvanus. Silvanus labored with Paul and Barnabas in the gospel (*Commentarii in Omnes D. Pauli Epistolas*, 2.550). The close association of God the Father and Jesus Christ in v. 1, he says, is correct, not least because salvation comes through Christ, his merit, and his Passion. In vv. 2–3 Paul gives thanks "unceasingly" (Greek, *adialeiptōs*; Latin, *indeseinenter*), remembering their triad of faith, hope, and love. These virtues sustain them in the face of opposition, as they await the coming of Christ with endurance (551). In v. 4, Paul's "knowledge" of the readers' election comes from God by revelation. Estius stresses their election, as Thomas did. The Holy Spirit gives them full conviction (v. 5; 552). The "power" of which Paul speaks (v. 5) may well include miracles.

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) was a Dutch theologian, widely known as an opponent of Calvin on predestination, yet fully committed to the Protestant faith. John Wesley and Methodism were strongly influenced by him. Like Calvin, Arminius comments particularly on "Our Gospel came to you not in word only, but in the power of the Holy Spirit" (v. 3). He writes, "He [Paul] openly attributes to the power of the Holy Ghost the certainty by which the faithful receive the word of the gospel" (*Works*, 1.9.49). He states, "the Papists" urge that anyone may claim the revelation of the Spirit, but they lack it. Arminius dismisses the argument. Jews and Muslims claim revelation, but this does not mean that Christians cannot claim revelation. He asks, "Will the true Church be any less a Church because the sons of a stranger arrogate that title to themselves?" (49). The Holy Spirit spoke through Paul's word. Arminius comments, "The Scripture perfectly delivers this truth ... the doctrine of faith, hope, and charity ... 1 Thess. 1:3" (1.20.224).

**Lancelot Andrewes** (1555–1626) became successively bishop of Ely, bishop of Winchester, and bishop of Chichester. He was chaplain to Queen Elizabeth,

and worked under James I on the Authorized Version of the Bible. His well-known work *Private Devotions* contained his “The First Day,” which was taken from a series of morning prayers:

Grant me, Lord, to love those who love me;  
 My own friends, and my father's friends ...  
 Thou who wouldst that we overcome evil with good,  
 And pray for those who persecute us,  
 Have pity on my enemies, Lord, as on me,  
 And lead them together with me to thy heavenly kingdom.  
 Thou who grantest the prayers thy servants make for one another,  
 Remember, Lord, for good, and pity all those who remember me in their prayers,  
 Or whom I have promised to remember in mine ...  
 (“Intercessions,” *Private Devotions*)

**George Herbert** (1593–1633), poet and hymn-writer, writes on *hope* (v. 3):

I gave to Hope a watch of mine; but he  
 An anchor gave to me,  
 Then an old Prayer-book I did present:  
 And he an optick sent.  
 With that I gave a viall full of tears:  
 But he a few green eares.  
 Ah Loyterer! I'le no more, no more, I'le bring:  
 I did expect a ring.  
 (*Works*, 125)

Herbert also wrote more than one poem on *prayer*. One that reflects v. 2 reads as follows:

Of what an easie quick accesse,  
 My blessed Lord, art thou! How suddenly  
 May our requests thine eare invade!  
 To shew that state dislikes not easinesse,  
 If I but lift mine eyes, my suit is made:  
 Thou canst no more not heare, then thou canst die ...  
  
 Since then these three wait on thy throne,  
*Ease*, *Power*, and *Love*; I value prayer so,  
 That were I to leave all but one,  
 Wealth, fame, endowments, vertues, all should go;  
 I and deare prayer would together dwell,  
 And quickly gain, for each inch lost, an ell.  
 (*Works*, 104)

Herbert's poems on *love* spoke more of love from God than of love to one another, but we recall his outstanding poem "Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back" (104). George Herbert wrote of *election* (v. 4): "Blessed be God! . . . Thou hast elected us, thou hast called us, thou hast justified us, sanctified, and glorified us: Thou wast born for us, and thou livedst and diedst for us: Thou hast given us the blessings of this life, and of a better" ("A Prayer After the Sermon," *Works*, 300).

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) similarly wrote that Paul appeals to no title "Because his apostleship was not doubted by them, and there were no false apostles among them to question or deny it" (*Commentary*, 731). Poole insisted that Paul does not mean God as Father in Plato's or Homer's sense, but in the distinctively "gospel" sense of the covenantal God of Jesus Christ. The grace of God was now said "to . . . shine forth"; and "peace" could bear the meaning "inner tranquility," although it also carries a more objective sense (732). Paul sees the readers as a seal on his apostleship, and thanks God for the success of the gospel. It is right that thanksgiving and prayer go together, especially in the case of ministers.

The faith of the readers was not a "dead" faith (Jas. 2:26), but one which resulted in labor and fervent love. Their hope was in Christ, in contrast to those who hope in merely human endeavor. They had hope in the sense of "patience with respect to an expected good," and patience in suffering, "waiting for God's Son from heaven." He continued: "All hope worketh patience . . . fixed upon Christ" (732). Other hope rests upon this lower visible world. Poole asserts, "We cannot know election as it is in God's secret decree, but as made manifest in the fruits and effects of it" (733). This is how Paul knew that the readers were elect. The readers experienced "much assurance," because they assented to the truth of the gospel, triumphing over "the waves of all objections" (733). Poole, in spite of his Reformed and Puritan tradition, sees "power" as meaning that the gospel is confirmed by miracles. He did not simply slavishly follow Calvin.

## The Eighteenth Century

The nonconformist biblical exegete **Matthew Henry** (1662–1714) published his classic *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* (6 vols.) in 1708–10. He was unable to complete his commentary on Thessalonians, but left a more concise comment in his *Concise Commentary*. From this we can see his very practical application of this passage: "We should pray not only for ourselves, but for others also, remembering them without ceasing." He continues, "True

faith ... will work. It will affect both the heart and life. Faith works by love. It shows itself in love to God, and love to the neighbor” (on 1 Thess. 1:1–5). By this, he asserted, we know our election, and are raised up to heavenly things. Without the Holy Spirit, the word of God is merely a dead letter. Henry shows how readily a biblical passage may address a present reader.

The biblical expositions of **Johann Albrecht Bengel** (1687–1752), often reckoned among the Pietists, are a classic. He spoke of the “pure sweetness” of this Epistle, in which Paul needs no title. Paul writes “familiarly to the godly Thessalonians, who required no preface respecting his apostolic authority” (*Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, 796). Bengel declares, “Work is opposed to empty words, and in the singular signifies something lasting and effective.” He saw labor as “outward kindnesses,” in contrast to those “who evade all exertion for the sake of their own interests” (796). He warned against sloth. The Holy Spirit performed “his saving and miraculous operation” (*nec non miraculosa*, 797).

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88), John Wesley’s younger brother, was one of the greatest of the hymn-writers of the eighteenth century. The following hymn is based on Ephesians 6, but also reflects 1 Thess. 1:3 and 8 less directly:

But, above all, lay hold  
On faith’s victorious shield;  
Armed with that adamant and gold  
Be sure to win the field.

If faith surround your heart,  
Satan shall be subdued,  
Repelled his every fiery dart,  
And quenched with Jesu’s blood.

(Watson (ed.), *Anthology*, 178).

**John Newton** (1725–1807) was a former slave master who became a Christian, partly under the influence of George Whitefield, wrote on faith, experience, and prayer. Commenting on “unceasing prayer,” he wrote:

Even in the exercise of prayer by which we profess to draw near to the Lord, the consideration that his eye has little power to ... prevent our thoughts from wandering ... to the ends of the earth. What should we think of a person who, being admitted into the king’s presence, upon business of the greatest importance, should break off in the midst of his address, to pursue a butterfly? (*Works*)

**William Cowper** (1731–1800), who was closely associated with John Newton, also composed many poems and hymns. The following is taken from his poem

“Hope,” which speaks of a hope that is finally fulfilled at the last day, reflecting the main thrust of hope in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, not least in 1 Thess. 1:3:

These shall last when night has quenched the pole,  
And heav'n is all departed as a scroll:  
And when, as justice has long since decreed,  
This earth shall blaze, and a new world succeed,  
Then these thy glorious works, and they who share  
That hope which can alone exclude despair,  
Shall live exempt from weakness and decay,  
The brightest wonders of an endless day.

(Poems)

As J. R. Watson comments, “Cowper’s image ... is that of sunshine after rain” (*Anthology*, 223).

Some of Cowper’s hymns also presuppose the importance of faith. He wrote “God moves in a mysterious way” in 1773, shortly before suffering a breakdown. The sixth and final verse reads:

Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain;  
God is his own interpreter,  
And he will make it plain.

(Cowper, *Olney Hymns*)

## The Nineteenth Century

The Romantic poet **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792–1822), who with his second wife, Mary Shelley, lived an unconventional life, did not hold Christian views. Whereas biblical writers saw love as an act and habit of the will, Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, saw it as an expression of the imagination:

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination ... Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination. (“A Defence of Poetry,” 944–56)

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839), professor of biblical exegesis, wrote commentaries on several of the epistles. His commentary on Thessalonians was

published posthumously in 1840. He explains that Silvanus and Timothy, the co-authors, had accompanied Paul to Macedonia, but had at first remained behind in Beroea, and then followed him from there (Acts 17:14–15; *Commentary*, 383). He notes that the phrase “in God the Father” remains distinctive to 1 and 2 Thessalonians, anticipating Albert Schweitzer’s objections to the phrase. But this is perhaps understandable, since these two epistles emphasize “God” more than other Pauline epistles, except Romans. The “three cardinal virtues,” faith, love, and hope, occur here in this order, although in 1 Corinthians love is mentioned last to underline its importance (384). Love is not merely “a beneficent feeling,” but a power which is active in self-denial and exertion (384). The whole passage, Olshausen comments, is meant to paint “the independent manner in which the Christians in Thessalonica let Christianity become operative in them, and know how to uphold it against all attacks of the world” (385).

The poet **Alfred Tennyson** (1809–92) combined the Arthurian legend with Christian elements. In *The Coming of Arthur*, he wrote, “The King will follow Christ, and we, the King.” On continual prayer (1 Thess. 1:2–3) he wrote:

Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of. Therefore, let thy voice  
Rise like a fountain for me day and night.  
For what are men better than sheep or goats . . .  
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer  
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?  
For so the whole round earth is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

(ll. 1414–22)

**Henry Alford** (1810–71), dean of Canterbury, published his *Greek Testament* (4 vols.) in 1857. He followed others in noting that the readers have received “a faith that had its outward effect on your lives; a love that spent itself in the service of others; a hope that was no mere transient feeling, but was content to wait for the things unseen when Christ should be revealed” (*Greek Testament*, 3.250). Election, Tennyson continues, “should not be softened down.” It involved the readers’ reception of the word, even if in much tribulation” (250–1). Both their joy and their tribulation constituted signs of their election. The Greek *plērophoria* means *much confidence*, in contrast to many erroneous interpretations such as “fullness of spiritual gifts” (Turretin), or “fulfillment of the apostolic office” (Estius).

**Charles J. Ellicott** (1816–1905) became professor of divinity at Cambridge, and subsequently bishop of Gloucester. He believed that “the title had not

yet been assumed by Paul and his converts” (*Commentary*, 1). He saw some vocabulary as unique to Paul, and asserted that *labor* (Greek, *kopos*) certainly carries overtones of “toil” (6). Election refers to the sovereign decree of God. “In that” or “because” in v. 5 is causative, giving the reason for Paul’s knowledge (7). The reference to “power” (5) is climactic, not explanatory. Ellicott supports Calvin’s view that it is not miraculous powers, but *reality* (as Karl Barth later argues), or a matter of energy and effect. In v. 6 the readers imitate the common lifestyle of Paul and his co-workers, who founded the church (9).

**Gottlieb Lünemann** (1819–94) considered that Paul omitted an official title because of the “devoted love” which bound him to the readers (*Thessalonians*, 18). “Labour of love” denotes “the active labour of love, which shuns no toil or sacrifice, in order to minister to the wants of our neighbors, not a forbearing love,” which overlooks their faults (24). “Hope” is also “the constancy which suffers not itself to be overcome by obstacles.” Verse 5 concerns the power and confidence with which the gospel was preached (26). This is not a miraculous power, as Calvin also asserts (27). The next verse (v. 6) concerned the readers’ “receptivity for the preaching of the gospel” (29). The word “affliction” (Greek, *thlipsis*) naturally means “trials and sufferings” (30).

**Edward M. Bounds** (1835–1913), who published nine books on prayer, wrote: “Prayer promotes a spirit of devotion, while devotion is favorable to the best praying . . . Prayer thrives in the atmosphere of true devotion . . . Devotion engages the heart in prayer . . . The great lack of modern religion is a lack of devotion. . . a mere religious performance” (*Essentials of Prayer*, 10–11). Bounds said in the late nineteenth century much of what William Law had already said in the eighteenth century. But it relates to 1 Thess. 1:2 and to elsewhere in Thessalonians.

**John Hutchison** (n.d.) emphasized Paul’s writing to Christians in a context of pagan disgust at what he regarded as “the unbroken monotony of evil everywhere” (*Lectures Chiefly Expository*, 6). He wrote, “God had his chosen ones” (6). Again, he spoke of “the ceaseless, restless, enmity of the Jews,” whereas a more variable picture may be more accurate. Yet, for all its extravagance, his comment “The world was against them” (7) conveys something of what it felt like to be a persecuted or oppressed minority, whom others saw as endangering the Roman privileges of the city. Hutchison further comments on Paul’s thanksgiving for the readers: “It was a memory the fragrance of which pervaded his whole life, the comfort of which sweetened all his trials. It was the remembrance of ‘their faith, and love, and hope’ – the three graces of the renewed life” (19). All this, Hutchison declares, is intensely practical. The thanksgiving suggests an example to imitate; the readers’ faith, love and hope suggests “our own duty and dignity” (23–4).

## Paul's Reflection on His Visit: The Readers are an Example to Believers from Greece (1 Thess. 1:6b–10)

### Introduction and Overview

The readers' "welcome" (Greek, *dechomai*) demonstrates the warmth of reception offered to Paul and his fellow workers. He reflects on the warmth of reception offered to them. "Turning" (*epistrephein*) is more frequent in Acts than in Paul, but readily denotes the conversion of Gentiles. To call God "living and true" recalls Isa. 42:8; 45:5–7, 15, 18–24; and Jer. 10:10 (see 1 Cor. 8:4–6:29). In the early twentieth century "turned from idols to serve the true and living God" became widely established as a virtual summary of the earliest Christian preaching to the Gentiles (Weiss, *Earliest Christianity*, 2.435). To accept the gospel openly in a pagan city was to court not only derision, but opprobrium. As William Neil comments, "We simply cannot appreciate today what it must have cost in terms of family, friends, society, to become a follower of the Way" (*Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians*, 19–20).

The concept of Christians waiting for the Parousia has also lost much of its Pauline prominence in modern thought. As the readers wait, with faith, not sight, we find a clash between traditional exegesis from the church fathers up until today, and many mid-twentieth-century writers and some today. The work of J. A. T. Robinson, T. F. Glasson, and others led to the church's traditional stress on a *future* advent being interpreted in a complex, but also reductionist, way. By 1969, however, the tide may have begun to turn again. Arthur Moore tackled earlier scholarship head-on. He pointed out that many "modern scholars" argued that the eschatological theme was foreign to Jesus and "lacking in the earliest Christian preaching." Old Testament imagery concerning theophany was transferred to Christ, or Christologies allegedly became confused. Moore writes, "These explanations are particularly weak" (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 31). He argues this more fully in *The Parousia in the New Testament* (92–107, 160–74, 207–18).

B. S. Childs and George B. Caird strengthen this with their arguments on "broken" myth (Childs, *Myth and Reality*, 42; Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 243–71). The issue remains controversial, in spite of work by Beda Rigaux on Thessalonians (*Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, 195–280), and especially by Jürgen Moltmann (*Coming of God*, 6–29, 150–9, 226–319) and N. T. Wright (*Resurrection of the Son of God*, 209–77, 558–9). Ernest Best comments, "The belief that Jesus would return again from heaven . . . was common to primitive Christianity and is particularly emphasized in our epistles" (*Thessalonians*, 83).



There is a deliberate repetition of “God” in v. 10. Paul characteristically speaks of God’s *raising* (active voice) Christ (Rom. 8:11). God acts in the world from creation to judgment. On judgment, if a child is bent on self-destruction, a parent may be angered. A less loving parent might be indifferent to this behavior. Moltmann urges that a God who cannot suffer and feel cannot love either (*Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 38; see 21–60). Some regard the phrase “rescues us from the wrath that is coming” (Greek, *rhuomenon*, v. 10) as a reflection of an early apocalyptic view which Paul later abandons. But he uses the identical Greek word (*rhuomai*) in Rom. 7:24; 1 Cor. 1:10; and Col. 1:13 (see also 2 Thess. 3:2), and we have already cited Klaus Koch, J. Christiaan Beker, Alexandra Brown, and others, on the importance of apocalyptic for Paul and even for the church today.

## The Subapostolic and Patristic Era

**Polycarp** (c. 69–c. 155) begins in a similar way to Paul: “I have greatly rejoiced . . . because you have followed the example of true love” (*Epistle to Philipppians* 1). On his way to martyrdom in Rome, **Ignatius of Antioch** (c. 35–107) urges, “Permit me to be an imitator (Greek, *mimētēs*) of the sufferings of my God” (*To the Romans* 6.3; also in Lake (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, 1.234–5; see also v. 7).

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150–215) explains how revelation can act like a physician, to cure the whole world of suffering and evil (see v. 8; Clement, *The Instructor* 1.1, 2; ANF 2.1.2). **Tertullian** (c. 160–c. 225) speaks of “the crime of idolatry,” referring to the golden calf and the Bāalim (1 Kings 12:25–33), and quotes 1 Thess. 1:9–10 explicitly: “You turned from idols to serve the living and true God” (*On the Resurrection* 24.1; ANF 3.562). Here he uses the passage to argue for the resurrection; and to denounce idolatry (*An Answer to the Jews* 1; ANF 3.152).

**Origen of Alexandria** (c. 185–c. 254) apparently does not comment on 1 Thess. 1:6b–10 in his extant writings, but writes much on the Holy Spirit (v. 6b). He rightly associates the Spirit with Christ, who is given openly “after the ascension of Christ to heaven,” when Christ gave gifts to humankind. But (against Marcion) the “one Spirit” was also active in the prophets and the apostles, as well as most notably “in the last days” (*De Principiis* 2.7.2; ANF 4.285). The Holy Spirit is wisdom and knowledge, and the Paraclete of the gospel, but he is also a Person of majesty (*De Principiis* 2.7.3–4). “He bestows consolation upon the souls to whom He openly reveals the apprehension of spiritual knowledge” (2.7.4; 286). The Holy Spirit is divine, because he manifests divine attributes (*Commentary on John* 2.77). The Holy Spirit, as Paul argues in 1 Thess. 1:6b, gives “comfort and joy of heart” (*De Principiis* 2.7.4; ANF 4.286).

**Cyprian** of Carthage (d. 258) suffered during the Decian persecution, and was forced to flee into exile. He wrote that persecution arises to “prove” or to

test Christians, and cites Paul's words in Rom. 5:2–5: "We glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulations work patience," which is broadly parallel with 1 Thess. 1:6–7 (*Treatise* 10.9; ANF 5.501).

**Athanasius** (c. 296–373) saw idolatry as the origin of the human decline from communion with God (*Contra Gentes* 10.3; NPNF2 4.9). The essence of sin is a rejection of contemplation of God, and humanly constructed idols distract people from God, so they need to turn from them to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9). The word of God goes forth to the world because it is not simply the word of man (*Discourse* 1.8.28; 2.18.35).

**Basil of Caesarea** (c. 330–379) quotes v. 9, "to turn from idols to serve the living and true God" as summing up the "turning" in baptismal faith and liturgy in the threefold name of the Holy Trinity (*On the Holy Spirit* 10.26; NPNF2 8.17). **Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 330–395), the younger brother of Basil, explicitly quotes the same passage, but for a different purpose. He is discussing the accusation of Eunomius that he confuses reality and non-reality or mere appearance. Christians, Gregory asserts, flee from superstitious error and from idols to embrace the truth and "to serve the true and living God" (*Against Eunomius* 2.4; NPNF2 5.105; and *Orations on the Holy Light* 39.8).

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) comments on v. 6b, "Such is the joy of the Spirit. In return for the things which appear to be grievous, it [or he] brings out delight ... The Spirit did not forsake you" (*Homily* 1; NPNF1 13.325). He notes the readers' status as examples (v. 7), and observes that they so shone that they "became teachers of those who received [the word]" before them (*Hom.* 1; 325). On v. 8, he compared the sounding forth of the word to "the sound of a loud trumpet" (1 *Thess. Hom.* 2; NPNF1 13.327). Paul calls them examples to those who *already* believed. Their zeal did not exempt them from the need of Paul's prayers; we can never pass beyond the need for others to pray for us, as many biblical examples suggest (vv. 7–8). Chrysostom adds that the Macedonians were always ready to celebrate good news, as they did over the exploits of Alexander the Great. The readers "readily" turned from idols (v. 9), to await "both the Resurrection ... the second Coming, the Judgment" (*Homily* 2; NPNF1 13.328). On Phil. 1:22, Chrysostom expounds Paul's longing to depart and to be with Christ, yet also his desire to fulfill his calling on earth. He wrote, "Nothing can be more blessed than the spirit of Paul ... Nothing is more noble. We all shudder at death ... [Paul says] 'To depart is very far better' ... Oh! That spirit of Paul!" (*Homilies on the Philippians* 4; NPNF1 13.198–9).

**Theodore of Mopsuestia** (c. 350–c. 428) stresses that the readers do not seek glory from humankind, nor was this Paul's intention. Christian believers suffer abuse. Yet through the cross, Theodore asserts, accepting suffering and tribulation will bring our salvation. To accept what happens to us in a

good spirit will enable us to endure it with joy (*cum gaudio*) from the Holy Spirit. All will then know and admire such suffering on behalf of faith and our teaching, as the readers in truth recognize their Lord, whom God raised from the dead, and who will come to us from heaven (*In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, 5–6).

**Pelagius** (c. 360–c. 430) speaks of the readers’ suffering and their joy in the Holy Spirit, and of their reputation in every place (*Expositions*, 419–20). **Augustine** (354–430) recognizes that “hope” endures until “the day breaks, and the shadows flee away” (*Confessions* 14.15). He asserts, “Every man shall see the Christ of God” (*City of God* 22.29; NPNF1 2.508).

**Theodoret of Cyrus** (c. 393–c. 460) remarks that the Thessalonians’ ardor for their faith is celebrated everywhere, “and has prompted many to zeal for godliness” (*Letters*, 109). More than this, Paul gives them the highest honor by calling them not only imitators of the apostles, but also imitators of Christ himself (108). God has “freed us from the deception of the idols,” who are not “true” deities, Paul asserts, and “bade us look forward to the second coming of the Only begotten . . . that was raised from the dead, being immune to suffering” (109). Christ’s identity remains the same after the ascension. The readers are “to wait for his Son from heaven, whom God raised from the dead, even Jesus” (*Letters*, 146; NPNF2 3.321).

## The Medieval Period

**Rabanus Maurus** (c. 780–856) reminds us that Paul aims to replace sadness with joy by reminding the readers that suffering is part of imitating the Lord through sharing in the cross, which brings salvation. Their joy can be sustained by the Spirit. Their reputation as Christians has already spread. They must also be mindful of the resurrection, and their release from the effects of sin (*Epistolas B. Pauli*, PL 102.542–3). In his *Sermon on the Day of Pentecost*, Rabanus declared, “My beloved brothers, the more we receive the joys of today’s celebration, the more we seek for it, and the more eagerly we drink its cooling draught, and the more we burn with thirst for it.” Pentecost set the first Christians on fire with Christ’s love, “and made them steadfast amid the persecutions of the Jews, abounding in heavenly joy” (*Five Sermons*, 305).

The anonymous hymn **Veni Creator** is also ascribed to the ninth century:

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire  
And lighten with celestial fire;  
Thou the anointing Spirit art,  
Who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.

Thy blessed unction from above  
Is comfort, life, and fire of love;  
Enable with perpetual light  
The dullness of our blinded sight.  
(tr. John Cosin)

**Rupert of Deutz** (c. 1075–1129), a monastic theologian, wrote on allegorical interpretation and on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He endorsed the apocalyptic notion of a succession of empires in Daniel, and the oppression of the faithful. Abbot Cuno asked him for a treatise on the victory of God’s Word. Rupert wrote, “Great and powerful is God’s Word, who has prevailed . . . It was a mighty struggle and mighty were its events . . . [But] the will of God shall prosper . . . By the seal of the cross . . . he [Christ] is expected to return to judge the living and the dead” (“On the Victory of God’s Word,” in McCracken and Cabaniss (eds.), *Early Mediaeval Theology*, 230, 281–2).

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–74) typically uses other scriptures to shed light on a given piece of scripture. In his *Lectures* on 1 Thessalonians alone he has 340 scriptural citations (Paddison, *Theological Hermeneutics and 1 Thessalonians*, 74). Paul’s allusion to *example*, and to *joy through suffering* comes together in several passages: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” The theme of imitation or example becomes a challenge. Aquinas writes, “You are our imitators to such an extent that you can be imitated by others.” Therefore he cites Macedonia and Achaia. The implication is clear: would any want to imitate us? “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works” (Matt. 5:16; Aquinas, *Commentary*, 10).

Aquinas quotes from the Old Testament and Apocrypha: “Return to me with your whole heart” (Joel 2:12), and “Do not delay to turn to the Lord” (Sir. 5:7). The reference to idols finds a parallel in 1 Cor. 12:2 and Rom. 1:25. The words “living” and “true” serve to exclude idolatry. God is the living God (Deut. 32:40). The readers may rightly expect a reward. They await Christ’s coming. Aquinas refers to Luke 12:16 and Isa. 30:18, “Blessed are those who wait for him.” We await the final resurrection (Rom. 8:11; Phil. 3:21) and freedom from punishment to be declared at the last judgment. Believers are those who have heard and obeyed the warning “to flee from the wrath to come” (Matt. 3:7; Aquinas, *Commentary*, 11).

**John Wycliffe** (c. 1333–84), who prepared the way for the Reformation, extended the concept of “idolatry” to include the view of the Eucharist implied

by transubstantiation. To say that the cup contains the real blood of Christ is virtually to say, “Why not commit idolatry?” “When we see the host, we ought to believe not that it is itself the body of Christ, but that the body of Christ is sacramentally concealed in it ... When this error of idolatry has been destroyed, we can worship God more purely” (*Eucharist*, in Spinka (ed.), *Advocates of Reform*, 64). Wycliffe thus gives the phrase “turned from idols” a meaning that Paul could not have envisaged, but expands the notion to include a new situation.

## The Reformation and Post-Reformation Eras

**Martin Luther** (1483–1546) argued as a general principle that Paul’s stress on suffering and on the dynamic spread of the gospel sits ill with the Rome of his time, with its fine buildings and the wealth of its clergy. He writes, “In popery I saw that all men gave abundantly to the building and maintaining of goodly temples ... the riches of bishops and the rest of the clergy did increase” (*Galatians* 547; WA 40, 2.155). Luther also appreciates that Romans 5 and 8 address the issue of suffering and joy. In Romans 8, God gives the Holy Spirit, so that our sufferings are far surpassed. Luther expounds the dialectic of tribulation and joy from Hebrews 12:2–11. He asserts, “We glory in our tribulations” (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Early Theological Works*, 233).

**John Calvin** (1509–64) argues that Paul’s use of the Greek *typos* matches the Latin *exemplar*. The Thessalonians, he observes, had been so courageous that other believers borrowed from them a rule of constancy. But *pattern* does not necessarily imply uniformity: “There were as many *patterns* as there were individuals” (*Commentary*, 21). The work and power of the Holy Spirit was involved in their reception of the gospel. Calvin’s phrasing recalls 1 Cor. 2:1–5. He continues, “Although not all worship idols, all are nevertheless addicted to idolatry and are immersed in blindness and madness” (22). All the same, “the kindness of God” rescues believers from such effects of idolatry and sin. Further, “It is necessary that we be converted to God before we can serve him” (22). To serve the living and true God (v. 9) is “the purpose and effect of genuine conversion” (22). Idols are dead and worthless. Believers, Calvin writes, must be stirred up to the hope of eternal life “to wait for his Son” (v. 10); otherwise the world will quickly draw us to itself. He comments, “As it is only confidence in the divine goodness that induces us to serve God, so it is only the expectation of final redemption that keeps us from giving way and losing heart” (23). Without Christ, we are thrown into despair. “Deliverance will become apparent on the last day.” “God’s wrath and everlasting destruction are impending over the human race, inasmuch as everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s glory” (23; Rom. 3:23).

This entirely accords with Calvin's theology in his *Institutes*. He asserts, appealing to the orthodox and especially to Augustine: "We bring an innate corruption from the very womb ... (Psalm 51:5) ... All of us ... came into the world tainted with the contagion of sin ... in God's sight defiled and polluted" (*Institutes* 2.1.5; 2.1.8–11). But Christ as Prophet, Priest, King, and Mediator, allows us "to seek righteousness ... life and salvation." "By his death, sin was abolished; by his resurrection, righteousness was restored and life renewed" (*Institutes* 2.17.3).

**James Arminius** (1560–1609) discusses idols and idolatry. In his *Works* 43.2 he considers the idol as representative of what is "conceived only in the mind or framed by the hands ... and every false divinity, whether it be the pure figment of the human brain, or any thing existing among the creatures of God" (*Disputation* 23.2; Arminius, *Works*, 341). He explicitly appeals to 1 Thess. 1:9.

**Estius** (1542–1613) speaks of joy in the Holy Spirit, of "the love of Christ" and "the hope of glory" (*Omnes Epistolae* 2.553). The readers became an example not only to all in Macedonia, but "to the faithful in every place," as Ambrosiaster commented (554). The latter is a hyperbole. The readers have turned to God from idolatrous likenesses (*a simulacris*) of him (v. 9). Idolatry was a particular sin of Gentiles. But now they have encountered truth, as Erasmus observed. Therefore they now await Jesus the Son from heaven.

**Jeremy Taylor** (1613–67), chaplain to King Charles I, and best known for his *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, wrote: "It remains, that we who are alive, should so live, and ... attend the coming day of the Lord, that we neither be surprised, nor leave our duties imperfect, nor our sins uncanceled, nor our persons unreconciled, nor God unappeased; but that, when we descend to our graves, we may rest in the bosom of the Lord" (*Holy Dying*, in *Selected Writings*, 115). Also in *Holy Dying* he wrote that if we are not to fear death, we must try to be in love with "the felicities of saints and angels," and that "above there is a country better than ours."

**Thomas Vincent** (1634–78), the nonconformist preacher and author of *Fire and Brimstone in Hell, to Burn the Wicked* (1670), cited Ps. 11:6, "Upon the wicked He shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and a horrible tempest, this shall be the portion of their cup," and proceeded to comment:

The flames and fiery streams, which were rained down from heaven upon Sodom and Gomorrah formerly, and which issued forth from the earth in the eruptions of Mount Aetna lately, are but shadows of the future flames, and like painted fire in comparison, with the streams of fire and brimstone, which in hell shall burn the wicked eternally. For as the glory of heaven (while we are in the dark vale of this world) does far exceed all conception, and therefore cannot be set forth in full by any description; but as one says, whoever attempts to speak of an heavenly state, while himself is upon the earth, his discourse of that must needs be like the dark dreams and imaginations of a child. (Vincent, *Fire and Brimstone*, intro. to ch. 1; see also v. 10)

Vincent continues:

There is nothing that hell is described by in the whole book of the Scripture so much as by fire, and sometimes by fire mingled with brimstone. It is called fire in Matt. 3:10. Every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire; hell-fire, Mark 9:47. It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hellfire; a furnace of fire in Matt. 13:42, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire. It is called a place where the wicked shall be tormented with fire and brimstone, Rev. 14:10. And he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone, in the presence of the holy angels (Revelation 21:8), and shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. (ch. 3)

In another of Vincent's works, *The Vain Securities of the Wicked*, also published in 1670, he writes: "God will meet you as a bear bereaved of her cubs, and rend your heart, or like a roaring lion, and tear you in pieces; when there shall be none to deliver. God will take you into his hand, and throw you out of his presence into the bottomless gulf of unquenchable burnings. I think this should awaken you. . . . Consider the everlastingness of hell-fire, and your torment which there you must endure, if you be found in the number of unbelievers."

**Matthew Poole** (1624–79) suggested that the example of the readers "influenced all the believers both of Macedonia and Achaia," otherwise it is difficult to see why Paul would have mentioned it (*Commentary*, 733). Paul's allusion to "every place" is not hyperbole, but report. For Thessalonica was an eminent place. In far places the word is heard like an echo, as merchants, travelers, or letters carry the news (see 1 Cor. 14:8–9; Gal. 6:6). "Every place" means "here and there, up and down in the world" (*Commentary*, 733). The effects have been seen in everyday life, in spite of the fact that persecution followed. The readers' "turning from idols" showed how they forsook their former lifestyle. They now saw the folly of worshipping man-made constructions. Poole compares the "Papist" concern with "images" (734). God is the living God (v. 9). Christ is Son of God "by eternal generation," as Athanasius and Basil urged (734). In their affliction, they waited for the coming of Christ "as a deliverer and rewarder . . . They believed that he was gone to heaven and would come again" (734). A "drop" of God's wrath shall not fall on them. The Greek *rhuomennon* (v. 10) signifies a powerful rescue.

The Puritan theologian and preacher **Thomas Watson** (c. 1620–86) typically wrote of Christ, that he "rescues us from the wrath that is coming," in 1 Thess. 1:10. Humankind are "heirs of wrath . . . If a man be fallen under the King's displeasure, will he labour to re-ingratiate himself into his favor? Oh let us flee from the wrath of God! And whither should we fly, but to Jesus Christ. There is none else to shield off the wrath of God from us . . . 1 Thess. 1:10"

(“Man’s Misery by the Fall,” *Body of Divinity*, 112). Only Christ can save from sin and from wrath (“Christ’s Exaltation,” *Body of Divinity*, 148).

## The Eighteenth Century

**August Hermann Francke** (1663–1727), a well-known leader of the Pietist movement, wrote that “resurrection from natural death . . . at the Last Day” is well enough understood, when not just the physical body but “the whole man . . . may be qualified for the rewards and punishments of the next [life]” (see 1 Thess. 1:10; Francke, *A Sermon on the Resurrection* [1732], in Erb [ed.], *Pietists*, 130).

**John Gill** (1697–1771), a Strict Baptist minister, published a commentary on the whole Bible (1746–66), wrote on the Hebrew language, and produced shorter works, including ones on the fate of the wicked and the bliss of the saints. His work on the fate of the wicked shows what “to flee from the coming wrath” (v. 10) meant to him personally:

The place of torment is bounded by a great gulf, so that there is no passing from that to a state of happiness; which gulf is no other than the eternal and immutable decree of God, which can never be disannulled, but will remain fixed and unalterable. The heathens themselves represent Hades and Tartarus, by which they mean the same as hell, as so closely locked and shut up, that there is no return from thence; and as strongly fortified with iron towers and gates, with walls and adamantine pillars, as impregnable, and never to be broke[n] through . . . The veracity of God makes eternal punishment for sin necessary. He has threatened sin, the breach of his law, with eternal death; for such is the demerit of it; and his truth and faithfulness are engaged to fulfill the threatening, unless a compensation is made for sin committed. Not to punish sin would not be doing justice to [God] himself, and to the glory of his Majesty; it would be a denying himself, a concealing his perfections, and suffering his supreme authority over his creatures to be subject to contempt. (Gill, “Of the Final State of the Wicked in Hell,” *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* 1.7.10)

Gill, however, complemented this with a picture of the final blessedness of the saints:

It will consist in the enjoyment of the greatest glory, both in soul and body, beyond all present conception and expression. There will be a glory revealed in the saints, which is beyond all comparison; and a glory put upon them that is inconceivable; a glory upon their souls, which lie in perfect purity in them, in having the righteousness of Christ upon them, and the shining robes of light and bliss: a glory upon their bodies, which will be raised glorious, powerful, spiritual, and incorruptible, and ever continue; as Christ will appear in glory, they will appear in glory with him . . . Sorrow and sighing shall flee away



(Isa. 35:10). (Gill, “Of the Final State of the Saints in Heaven,” *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* 1.7.11)

**Charles Wesley** (1707–88), John’s younger brother and celebrated hymn-writer, composed a number of well-known hymns on the future coming of Christ. One of the best known, first published in 1758, includes the following verses:

Lo! He comes with clouds descending,  
 Once for favored sinners slain;  
 Thousand, thousand Saints attending  
 Swell the triumph of His train:  
 Alleluia!  
 God appears, on earth to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him  
 Robed in dreadful majesty;  
 Those who set at nought and sold him,  
 Pierced and nailed him to the tree,  
 Deeply wailing,  
 Shall the true Messiah see.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 51)

American theologian and philosopher **Jonathan Edwards** (1703–58), who was associated with the Great Awakening, wrote: “Let not the precious days and years of youth slip away without improvement. A time of the strivings of God’s Spirit is more precious than other time. Then God is near; and we are directed, in Isaiah 55:6. ‘To seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call upon him while he is near.’ (2 Corinthians 6: 2).” He continues: “Spend not such opportunities unprofitably, nor in such a manner that you will not be able to give a good account thereof to God. Waste them not away wholly in unprofitable visits, or useless diversions or amusements . . . You have need to improve every talent, advantage, and opportunity, to your utmost, while time lasts” (Edwards, *The Precious Importance of Time*).

**John Newton** (1725–1807) and **William Cowper** (1731–1800) refer to the return of Christ in a number of hymns. One verse of Cowper’s devotional hymn reads:

Thou shalt see my glory soon,  
 When the work of grace is done;  
 Partner of my throne shalt be,  
 Say, poor sinner, lov’st thou me?  
 (*Olney Hymns*, 75)

John Newton writes:

The Saviour, whom I then shall see  
With new-admiring eyes,  
Already has prepared for me  
A mansion in the skies.  
(*Olney Hymns*, 595)

## The Nineteenth Century

**Hermann Olshausen** (1796–1839) commented on vv. 7–8 in 1840: “Christianity makes no . . . Stoical demands. Spiritual joy did not exclude, but included, sorrow at the blindness of the men who persecuted God in those that are his” (*Commentary*, 386). The readers could become a “pattern” only when their faith was known (387). Paul spoke not only of outward entrance in v. 9, but of “access which St. Paul found to their hearts” (388).

Among the varied essays of Victorian writer **Walter Bagehot** (1826–77) was one on the House of Lords, *The English Constitution* (1867), which redefined “idols” (1 Thess. 1:10). Bagehot saw *money* as the chief *idol* of Victorian England:

The order of nobility is of great use, too, not only in what it creates, but in what it prevents. It prevents the rule of wealth – the religion of gold. This is the obvious and natural idol of the Anglo-Saxon. He is always trying to make money; he reckons everything in coin; he bows down before a great heap, and sneers as he passes a little heap. He has a natural instinctive admiration of wealth for its own sake. And within good limits the feeling is quite right. So long as we play the game of industry vigorously and eagerly . . . We shall of necessity respect and admire those who play successfully, and a little despise those who play unsuccessfully. (Bagehot, “The House of Lords,” *The English Constitution*)

This accords with the verdict of **Friedrich Schleiermacher** (1768–1834) that “These proud Islanders . . . know no watchword but *gain* and *enjoyment* . . . Their worldly wisdom [is] a false jewel . . . They are never in earnest with anything that goes beyond palpable utility” (*On Religion*, 9–10).

In 1884, **John Hutchison** (n.d.) observed “Confronted by the steadfast zeal of his converts, he [Paul] could say, “You are our glory and joy” (*Lectures Chiefly Expository*, 43). These Christians

left their name,  
A light – a landmark on the cliffs of fame.

Paul often looks for a “door opened by the Lord” for the gospel message (2 Cor. 2:12; see also Col. 4:3, “a door of utterance”). The word *idols*, in the plural, stood in contrast to the one, single, true God (44–5). Hutchison wrote, “Service without its accompanying hope would merge into dry and formal routine. Hope without its service . . . would press into indolent sentiment, or into restless and hysterical excitement” (46). The sufferings of the present are a cross that leads to something better, and Christians are delivered from the wrath of God:

Where grief and joy, disjoined,  
The true and false intertwined,  
Each to its destined place  
At the stern sentence gone,  
Shall dwell alone.

**James Denney** (1856–1917) stressed that Paul’s reminiscence concerned not only the delivery of the message (*Thessalonians*, 43), but evidence of its effects. This rests “not on the self-consciousness of the preachers” but on the objective change of life, and on God’s truth and faithfulness (44). He also stressed the unity of God, as the starting point for having some idea of his character, and of being able to enjoy a relationship with him (55). This includes moral integrity, obedience, and worship. Yet this passage also referred to the resurrection. Denney wrote, “There had been nothing like it before” (58). Then Paul spoke of the Parousia: “That attitude of expectation is the bloom, as it were, of Christian character. Without it, there is something lacking” (59). Yet it is often, today, Denney argues, an underestimated truth. This is even more pointed when we look at the phrase “God’s wrath.” This certainly did not mean “intemperate rage” (62). But it is “no empty name” (63). Denney suggests that this concept gives depth to the perfect work of Christ, not least on the cross.