

The future existence of the believers according to 2 Thessalonians

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Dates:

Received: 19 July 2010

Accepted: 14 Aug. 2010

Published: 07 June 2011

How to cite this article:

 De Villiers, P.G.R., 2011, 'The future existence of the believers according to 2 Thessalonians', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67(1), Art. #912, 9 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v67i1.912

This article investigated the presentation of the future existence of the believers in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. It analysed how the eschatological language of this letter reflects a situation in Thessalonica which has grown worse since the writing of 1 Thessalonians. It went on to explain to readers how this situation is handled by reflecting on it in terms of a divine plan and by portraying a future in which their suffering will come to an end. A close reading of some passages in 2 Thessalonians which speak of the dispensation which will follow on the glorious return of Christ at the end were presented during the course of this article. It investigated Christ's glorification at his return and delineated the way in which this return affects and determines the existence of those who accepted Paul's proclamation of the gospel. The future glory of the Lord is revealed, experienced and shared by believers in a mystical manner. The article ended with a brief discussion on the traditions which determined this perspective, the context in which the eschatological portrait must be understood and how the portrait of the future serves to support the community of saints in their time of suffering.

Introduction

In research on 2 Thessalonians, Pauline authorship is one of the issues of contention, especially because of the author's pronouncements on the future.¹ Already on this level the importance of the letter's eschatology is evident. The unique eschatological pronouncements and language in 2 Thessalonians are seen as indications that Paul could not have written this letter. The expectation of Christ's return only after the appearance of a man of lawlessness (2 Th 2:3), for example, is regarded as conflicting with a supposedly imminent expectation of the *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17.² Other issues which seem to contradict Pauline authorship are the man of lawlessness, his actions in the Jerusalem temple (2 Th 2:4) and the strong, vindictive language³ about future judgement in 2 Thessalonians 1.

This position on the eschatology of the letter and its authorship has not been accepted generally. In recent times, for example, attention has been drawn to similarities between the two letters and lack of convincing arguments against Pauline authorship. Thus, for example, Pauline authorship is accepted in such major publications like the theology of Dunn (1998) and the commentary of Malherbe on Thessalonians (2000).⁴

The study of the eschatology of the Thessalonian letters often focusses on 1 Thessalonians and on eschatology in terms of authorship. Other issues like, for example, the epistolary and rhetorical nature of 1 Thessalonians have also become prominent.⁵ An example of this was the study of Donfried and Beutler (2000) with the title 'The Thessalonian Debate'. The focus in this work was, however, also mostly on 1 Thessalonians, with minimum attention paid to 2 Thessalonians.⁶

Not many outcomes were generated by this work in terms of eschatology or in terms of the situation in which it functioned. In his contribution to this publication, Hughes (2000:252–253), in fact, noted how little insight rhetorical analysis generated about the social and cultural situation

1. Richard (1995:19), for example, writes, 'From the outset scholars have recognized serious difficulties posed, among other issues, by the eschatology of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 which presumes the Lord's imminent return and 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 which attempts to dispel such a notion'. Compare also Hughes' remark (2000:252) that there is an 'apparently' growing consensus that Paul did not write 2 Thessalonians.

2. Cf. the arguments in Trilling (1972:124–128); Müller (1988:41–67); Jewett (1986:3–18); Wanamaker (1990:17–28); Malherbe (2000:364–374) and Van Houwelingen (2005:28–29).

3. Dunn (2006:304) refers to the 'harsh note of vengefulness' in the letter.

4. Cf. also the insightful remarks by Giblin in this regard (1967:259) and Barclay (1993:512–530).

5. Following trends in New Testament studies in general.

6. In the case of 1 Thessalonians much attention was spent on its rhetorical and epistolary nature with minimal attention to other matters. This approach is spelled out in the volume as a new development which follows after an era in which the letters were read 'primarily as historical and theological documents' (Donfried 2000a:22).



of the Thessalonian letters.⁷ And yet, Hughes continues with the observation that the answers to the question whether 2 Thessalonians reflects the condition of the Thessalonian congregation or the interest of the author of 2 Thessalonians in doing persuasion through that letter, depends on further studies of 2 Thessalonians.

The relative lack of attention to 2 Thessalonians in contemporary research makes it necessary to investigate it in more depth, especially in terms of its contents. This article wishes to offer such a further study. And, since eschatology is a major issue in the letters to the Thessalonians, determining answers to other questions, it is necessary to continue reflecting on the letters' pronouncements on the future, as will be done in this contribution.

For the purposes of this article and as context for the topic under investigation, it is assumed here that 2 Thessalonians was written by Paul in 50–51 CE. The contents of the letter reflects the same warm relationship between Paul and his group of co-workers with the Thessalonians after their conversion during Paul's visit to their city (2 Th 2:5; 2:15; 3:10; cf. 1 Th 3:4; 4:2). The second letter, when compared to the first, however, reflects a worsening situation.⁸ Like in 1 Thessalonians, Paul again comforts and encourages the believers in their persecution in the second letter (2 Th 1:3–12), but his language is stronger when compared with 1 Thessalonians, as will be shown in this article. Paul now counters false beliefs that the Day of the Lord had already taken place (2 Th 2:2), instructs them about specific matters (e.g. the idlers in 2 Th 3:6–15) and asks for prayerful involvement in his ministry (2 Th 3:1–2).

The structure and contents of this short letter furthermore confirm the important place of eschatology in it. After the customary letter greeting (2 Th 1:1–2), 2 Thessalonians 1:3–12 contains a thanksgiving for the special faith, love and perseverance of the Thessalonians in their difficult situation. Paul reassures them that the future will bring a reversal in their fate and ends his remarks with a prayer for their well-being. This passage with its eschatological perspective sets the tone for what is to follow. The main body of the letter (2 Th 2:1–3:15) contains a substantial discussion of eschatological matters like the signs of the end (2 Th 2:1–12), before Paul notes some practical matters in the final part of the letter (2 Th 2:13–3:18) and ends the letter with the final greeting (2 Th 3:16–18). It is, however, especially 2 Thessalonians 1:3–12 which is relevant for the topic under discussion in this article.

This article will investigate a particular aspect of Paul's eschatology. Next to existing studies on individual eschatological issues in the Thessalonian letters, there is

7. Even in rhetorical analysis the authorship question keeps on lurking in the background, as is clear from Hughes' remark (2000:252–253) that 'whether or not 1 Thessalonians is considered rhetorically successful depends, of course, on one's judgment as to whether or not Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, and how the audience situation for that rather difficult letter is understood'.

8. Jewett (1986:60) writes, 'The extraordinary similarity in argument and vocabulary, the continuance of the persecution in Thessalonica (2 Th 1:4) and the fact that Timothy and Silas were still with Paul in Corinth – all of these factors demand as short a lapse of time as possible between the two letters'.

a need to investigate how the author of 2 Thessalonians conceptualised the existence of saints with and after the coming of the end.⁹ The question can be posed as to how does 2 Thessalonians speak of the future as a dispensation which the believers will experience after their earthly existence?

The future as the end of suffering

Although 2 Thessalonians reads the present from an eschatological perspective as dispensation which 'already' exists, its eschatology is also and mostly about end events that are still outstanding. As such it reflects the 'not yet' facet of Pauline eschatology. Paul discusses these future eschatological events specifically in two passages (2 Th 1:3–12; 2:1–12), although other passages also speak about these future events.

In general Paul's understanding of the future reflects and ties in with the situation in Thessalonica.¹⁰ Paul begins both his letters to the Thessalonians with a positive portrayal of the saints, mentioning their growing faith and love, but his appreciation can only be fully appreciated when this praise is linked with his remarks about their adverse condition. Severe suffering is namely a key issue in both letters to the Thessalonians (cf. 1 Th 1:2–3.6; 3:2). In 2 Thessalonians Paul speaks in more detail about their faith,¹¹ specifically as it exhibits itself in their endurance in persecution and trials (2 Th 1:4, 7). In 2 Thessalonians 1:4–6, for example, he refers repeatedly to their endurance amidst their persecution and distress several times through the words *διωγμοῖς* and *θλιψεῖσιν* and their cognates. The larger number of motifs of faith under duress and their presence at the beginning of the second letter, when compared with the first one, confirms how predominant the theme of suffering is. This stronger attention indicates that suffering has become even more serious than in the time of the first letter.

Paul deals with this suffering in 2 Thessalonians 1:3–12 from a faith perspective in two ways.¹² He links suffering, firstly, with the divine plan (Frame 1946:227; Malherbe 2000:395, esp. 396, 423).¹³ The saints' suffering indicates that the Thessalonians are deemed and are being judged worthy of the Kingdom of God (2 Th 1:5; cf. 1 Th 2:12).¹⁴ In this way, Paul exhorts them to look beyond their suffering. They need to understand their adverse conditions in terms of their spiritual journey

9. Cf. Weima and Porter (1998) for an overview of research.

10. On the difficulties involved in reconstructing the historical situation behind the Thessalonian correspondence, cf. Donfried and Beutler (2000:7–8) and the literature mentioned there. One of the major issues is the way in which a historical situation is created from a mirror reading of a text.

11. Cf. the important study of Giblin (1967) in which he explains the decisive role of faith in 2 Thessalonians.

12. Börschel (2001:396) observed that 2 Thessalonians does not link the suffering of the believers with their following of the example of Christ or of Paul as in 1 Thessalonians.

13. Cf. also Collins (1984:45–46; but especially p. 250).

14. This would be the translation if the phrase expressed purpose. The alternative is that it indicates result (with the result that you are made worthy). Malherbe (2000:395) points out that it is notoriously difficult to distinguish between the two. Cf. also Williams (1992:113), but also Richards (1995:318–319) who observes, 'The theological answer to the community's suffering is God's mysterious plan for inclusion in the kingdom'.

with God. For Paul, secondly, the future will bring the end of suffering. The future, in Paul's language, will bring 'relief' [ἀνεσιν¹⁵] from their present affliction (2 Th 1:6–7). Faith as endurance will bear fruits at the consummation when their present state of affliction will end and they will live in God's kingdom without any suffering. Suffering, then, does not speak the last word.

Relief is more than a mere end of affliction when it is considered within the wider context in which this word is used here. It should be understood here in an apocalyptic sense, referring to the general expectation of eschatological peace and rest that suffering believers will experience. It is not only a reversal which will take place. Their future existence will consist of a time of peace. This 'relief' has a special significance in the dire situation of the Thessalonians (Malherbe 2000:398). It fits in well with Paul's emphasis in 1 Thessalonians on peace (1 Th 5:23), but it is also closely connected with Paul's expectation of 'glory' as a future reward for the faithful, which he shares with his Jewish traditions (cf. further below).¹⁶

The effect of these two faith perspectives on the saints' suffering in the present is that their situation is framed by the action of God. Nothing happens in the present which will affect their relationship with God. Their relationship with God in the future will also be without their earthly affliction. God is thus portrayed as deeply involved in their lives – not only in terms of how God regards them as 'worthy' of the kingdom, but also in terms of what waits for them in the future.¹⁷ Paul thus assists them to understand their situation from the perspective of their spiritual journey and to look beyond events to the divine presence in their midst. He offers them a spiritual perspective on their present situation that challenges them to look beyond what is happening to them and to reflect on it in terms of their intimate relationship with God.

God, furthermore, takes the initiative to restore to them life in the fullest sense of the word. This contrasts with their opponents who are responsible for their affliction, thereby destroying their lives. The future will transform their existence by removing the affliction and suffering imposed by others on them. It will create the space within which they will no longer be under pressure from outside because of what others do to them, nor under pressure because of their inner concerns about their suffering.

This perspective which Paul offers them about the future at the same time reflects Paul's pastoral concern for them. In their suffering, he is their mystagogue who accompanies them

15. Baur-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker (1979:65) translate this word as 'rest', 'relaxation', 'relief'. Paul uses it as the opposite of ἄλιψι [distress] in 2 Corinthians 7:5; 8:13. In Louw and Nida (1988:246) it is part of the domain of trouble, hardship, relief and favourable circumstances. They describe it as cessation of suspension of trouble and difficulty. Other words in this domain are ἀνάπαυσι [rest] and ἀνάψυξι [refreshing]. The first of these two also appear in Revelation 4:8; 14:11. Acts 3:21 also comes to mind (καιροὶ ἀποκαταστάσεω [times of restoration]).

16. Cf. Chibici-Revneanu (2007:453) who notes, 'Nicht die Leiden stellen das letzte Wort Gottes an die Adressaten dar, sondern sein Reich, Ruhe und Herrlichkeit'. Also Börschel (2001:400).

17. Collins (1984:252) made some seminal observations about the characterisation of God in 1 Thessalonians, noting, amongst others, that Paul's understanding of God is a 'touchstone' of Paul's theology.

in their journey of faith, asking with them the fundamental question about God's presence in their difficult situation and times. Paul's message offers them hope, but his remarks also would have strengthened their desire and longing to be with God as the One who remained faithful to them and regarded them as worthy of the kingdom in dire times.

The future as experiencing the presence of the Lord

The author of 2 Thessalonians speaks of the future existence of the saints also from two perspectives in the first chapter of the letter. They are informed that whilst their opponents will be judged, they themselves will enter into the presence of the Lord.

Once Paul has commended the Thessalonians at the beginning of the letter for their endurance in suffering and spoken of the future 'relief' (2 Th 1:3–7), he moves on to discuss the judgment of unbelievers and then to what lies beyond this for believers (2 Th 1:8–10). This focus on a future existence reflects a similar theme in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 about which Lüdemann (1984:233) noted that 'the point of argument is reached in v. 17, where the focus falls on the future, lasting fellowship with Christ'. This happens also in 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10 (which Lüdemann does not discuss). Although the future will reverse their situation of suffering, Paul wants to ensure his readers that it will be a permanent reversal and that it will be replaced by a situation in radical contrast with their present situation. He does this also by stressing the incompatibility of the opponents's actions in terms of God's character as the One who rejects and judges evil.

This is then developed in more detail in 2 Thessalonians 1:8–10. These verses have an intriguing pattern which deserves further discussion now.

The pattern in 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10

In 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10 Paul portrays the human existence and condition which the *parousia* inaugurates. The following analysis of these two verses indicates the way in which important motifs spell out the special nature of the future. It also reveals a neat pattern in which Paul expresses his understanding of the future which will begin with the Day of the Lord's coming:

A ὅτινες δίκην τίσουσιν ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον
ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ κυρίου
καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς δόξης τῆς ισχύου αὐτοῦ,

B ἵνα ὅταν ἔλθῃ ἐνδοξασθῆναι ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ
καὶ θαυμασθῆναι ἐν πάσι τοῖς πιστεύουσιν,
ὅτι ἐπιστεῖθι τὸ μαρτύριον ἡμῶν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ.

In the first part of verse 9, Paul describes the destruction that unbelievers face (A) and then in verse 10 discusses the *parousia* as inaugurating a special time for believers (B). He thus moves from a portrait of judgment to that of salvation.

But both these remarks belong together to inform readers of the letter as those who accepted Paul's proclamation about their future existence. This pattern must be discussed in more detail now.

Judgement as exclusion from God's presence

Judgement of unbelievers is explained to the readers of the letter as an important facet of their future existence. The unbelievers are, namely, those who opposed them and were responsible for their persecution and affliction. This was indicated in 2 Thessalonians 1:6 in the remark, that God justly repays with affliction those who afflict the saints. Their future fate, therefore, contrasts with that of 'those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (2 Th 1:8). This confirms that the future fate of humanity is determined by the relationship with the divine. Where humanity rejects a relationship with God and consequently has an evil lifestyle, God will respond by judging them in punishment.

Verse 9 (A) describes the nature of the punishment in more depth. At least three facets are mooted: unbelievers will face 'ruin' or 'destruction' which is, at the same time, presented as 'eternal' ([ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον]; cf. also e.g. 1 Th 5:3; 1 Cor 5:5). The eternal ruin is mentioned together with two further clauses which function as a synonymous parallelism (Frame 1946:236).¹⁸ A synonymous parallelism functions to emphasise a pronouncement by repeating it, but also, in this case, by expanding its contents and adding a further point.¹⁹ Those who disobey the Gospel are denied the powerful and lasting divine presence ['from the face of the Lord'; ἀπό²⁰ προσώπου κυρίου]. The parallelism explains the ruin as, firstly, not being with the Lord [ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ κυρίου] and, secondly, not sharing his glorious power [ἀπὸ τῆς δόξης τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ]. In this parallelism the phrase about the presence of the Lord is further connected with and its meaning developed by the phrase 'the glory of his strength' (2 Th 1:9b). The phrase ἀπὸ τῆς δόξης [from the glory]²¹ is, in turn, supplemented by and intensified in meaning with τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ [of his power]. This phrase contains a genitive of origin. The glory derives from the Lord's power (cf. further below).²²

Simply put, the ruin of unbelievers will be found and revealed in their lack of a relationship with God. With intense language,²³ Paul expresses the intimate community with the

18. Richards (1995:317) speaks of the author's 'fondness for parallel statements and phrases'.

19. Cf. Osborne (2006:226).

20. For different interpretations of the preposition, cf. Malherbe (2000:402). But Frame (1946:236) takes the preposition as separation. He refers to Acts 5:41; 7:45; Revelation 6:16; 12:14; 20:11 which would favour the spatial interpretation of this phrase.

21. For a discussion of the traditions, cf. Frame (1946:229–230).

22. Weinhhold (1995:33), following Rendtorff, points out how Hebrew Scriptures often alternates glory with God's face, power, goodness, beauty. He quotes Exodus 33:18ff where Moses asks to see God's glory and is told that God's goodness will pass before him. But the following verses speak of the revelation of God's face.

23. Frame (1946:231, cf. p. 236) notes that the character of the 'future felicity is not dwelt upon; in fact, the reward is only intimated – in virtue of what the believers are, Christ receives glory and admiration'. But Frame's analysis does not give due regard to the way in which the other motifs in this passage fill in the nature of the future.

divine in the future for some.²⁴ He thus continues what he has been doing in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and 5:10 where the *parousia* is seen as an entry into the divine presence, but here he does so in more powerful language. The future, as the parallelism in this passage intimates, is about believers' experience of the Lord's extraordinary glory (Van Houwelingen 2005:184). The opponents of the gospel and the saints will not enjoy this experience.

To understand the full impact of these verses, some general remarks about seeing God must be made at this point (which will also be relevant for the discussion on salvation below; cf. 3.4). The motif of seeing (the face of) God is used in other New Testament passages like Hebrews 12:14, 1 John 3:2 and Revelation 22:4.²⁵ It is a motif widely found in Hebrew Scriptures (cf. e.g. Ps 11:7; 18:10). Fuhs (2004:229) pointed out that seeing God is complementary to the notion of revelation.²⁶ In this sense it has to do with God's self-manifestation in person and action. He also observed that it is an epistemological term which describes the relationship between God and humanity. Of special importance are his comments that to see the face of God or Yahweh 'denotes an encounter with God that emphasizes the immediacy and personal character of the encounter'. This encounter establishes a 'special relationship of trust and protection' (cf. Ex 24:9–11). Seeing God is also prominent in eschatology where people are promised that they will see their maker in his beauty (Is 17:7; 33:17). Not seeing God, means being denied this special and fulfilling privilege.

Seeing God is also quite often linked in Hebrew Scriptures with the motif of experiencing God's powerful glory (Fuhs 2004:231). The notion of glory is especially relevant and significant. To see God means to experience the divine presence in God's actions and *kabod*. In Exodus 16:6–7, for example, Moses refers to the deliverance from Egypt and then adds, 'tomorrow you shall see the glory of Yahweh'. Not only the pending actions of God, but also eschatological actions are linked with the glory of God. Elsewhere, seeing God's glory is found in eschatological expectations of Yahweh's people (Is 66:18, 19).²⁷

For 2 Thessalonians 1:10 it is, however, particularly important to note the way in which judgment is linked with the motif of not experiencing the presence of and of seeing God. Once again Paul's thoughts resemble Scriptures (like Is 26:10) which indicate that the misery of the wicked is that they will *not* experience Yahweh's majesty and glory. In prophetic texts, glory thus signified God's judgment. Other Isaianic

24. Cf. also Chibici-Revneanu (2007:460) who links this with the resurrection. The resurrection and the Christ events are both the beginning and end events – 'als endgültige Heilswende ebenso wie als Ausgangspunkt einer neuen Gemeinschaft'. In this way Christ brings about the intimate relationship between the divine and those who accept the gospel. This is spelled out in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 where waiting on the Son is linked with his resurrection. The community with the faithful, grounded in the resurrection, thus finds its consummation in the *parousia*.

25. The Greek of Revelations 22:4 reads explicitly, καὶ ὄψονται τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ [and they will see his face].

26. Cf. Weinfeld (1995:34) for similar remarks.

27. Note the repeated reference to glory in this passage. Cf. on this further below.



passages are also relevant here (cf. about the divine presence, e.g. Isaiah 2:10, 19, 21, in which the flight of the unrighteous on the Day of the Lord is mentioned).²⁸

Paul thus foresees a future in which those who do not believe will 'eternally' be cut off from the presence of the Lord. Believers, in contrast, are told that this will not happen to them. The relationship with God will not be affected by God's judgment of evil. The hostile attitude of unbelievers to the community of God will eventually bring about a reversal of positions: they who are now responsible for the afflictions of God's people, will themselves become objects of affliction. The transformation works in both ways: not only are believers exempted from judgment, but unbelievers will be transformed from those who cause affliction to those who are struck by affliction (2 Th 1:6). It is a transformation in glory.

The powerful presence of Christ as judge

The transformative relationship between God and the saints is to a large extent determined by the way in which God is understood. In the previous sections of this article, attention was drawn to the faithfulness of God, the divine, transformative initiative and action and the fundamental opposition of God to evil. In the passage about the coming judgment and salvation (2 Th 1:9–10), there is a strong focus on the exalted character of the Lord. The repeated use of the motifs of 'presence' and 'glory' to express this, is complemented by other motifs in 2 Thessalonians 1:6: about the appearance which takes place 'from heaven', Christ who appears 'in blazing fire' and Christ who is accompanied by 'powerful' angels (2 Th 1:7; cf. also Is 66; Frame 1946:229).²⁹ The phrase 'in flaming fire' which reflects theophanic language (Ex 19:18; Dt 5:4; Dn 7:9–10, but cf. esp. Is 66:15–16), is often a mystical indication of the divine presence.³⁰ This is strikingly expressed in Acts 7:30–32 when Stephen retells the story of the flames of the burning bush that amazed Moses and that represent the presence of God.

This theophanic portrait is reinforced by motifs which reappear in the following section on the Day of the Lord (2 Th 2:1–12). 'That day', for example, comprises the 'revelation' or 'appearance' of the Lord (2 Th 1:7; ἐν τῇ ἀποκαλύψει; 2:8; τῇ ἐπιφανείᾳ τῇ παρουσίας). This special term implies that the heavenly secret with its divine origins and about actions will become a reality in the *parousia*.³¹

Christ is, however, also portrayed as powerful in how he

is not characterised in this letter. Börschel (2001:396) drew attention to the fact that the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ play no role in the letter. He is only the one who will return triumphantly in the future.

The powerful nature of the Lord's future return is also illustrated by Paul's remarks about how the lawless one will be destroyed with the *parousia* (2 Th 2:8–9; but cf. also 2:10). The downfall of the evil one is described in quite strong terms through a synonymous parallelism. The Lord will 'slay' the lawless one with the 'breath of his mouth' and 'destroy' him by the 'appearance of his coming'. The powerful evil one may perform miracles, signs and wonders and he may deceive many, but ultimately he is doomed to destruction (v. 3). He falls victim to the just judgment of God.

All these are theophanic motifs³² traditionally associated with God. Here, however, they are also ascribed to Christ. Once again God reaches out to humanity in Christ, who represents the divine will and action and who, consequently, embodies the divine.³³

This portrait of Jesus as judge is also striking because this verse is one of the few places in the Pauline letters where it is presented so explicitly. Dunn (2006:309–310) notes how 'bitty' and 'fragmented' the main body of Paul's letters is about the role of Christ in the events of the end time. Even though the hope of the *parousia* and the future glory appear often in Pauline texts and thus the figure of Christ is placed at the centre of the eschatological events, Christ exercises final judgement only in 1 Corinthians 4:4–5 and 2 Corinthians 5:10. In this sense the picture of Christ in the Thessalonian letters is relatively unique, though not unusual in the light of Paul's exalted descriptions of Christ elsewhere. Paul's picture of Christ as judge in 2 Thessalonians 1 reflects a high Christology. As the 'Lord' who appears 'from heaven' with exceptional glory and majesty, he is an exalted figure (cf. Dunn 2006:314).

All these motifs emphasise the special role of Jesus as Lord in the execution of judgement. It is a remarkable status that is allocated to Jesus. This status further explains how great the disaster that will overcome the perpetrators of evil is. They will be excluded from the Lord's awesome presence and from the majesty of his power (2 Th 1:9).³⁴ They are not

32. These motifs stem from prophetic and apocalyptic traditions that are often linked in theophanic passages about the Day of the Lord. Cf. for these elements Exodus 3:2; Daniel 7:9; Psalms 50:3; Zechariah 14:5; 1 Enoch 1:9; Mark 8:38; 13:27; 1 Corinthians 3:13.15; Jude 14; Ridderbos (1966:594); Menken (1994:86). The 'day' is an apocalyptic topos for the future coming (Menken 1994:91; cf., e.g. Zch 9:9.16; Mt 3:1–12; Mk 13:26.32). Here the Day of the Lord is linked with the *parousia* of Christ.

33. The role of God remains prominent. In 2 Thessalonians 1:11, for example, Paul prays that God may count the Thessalonians worthy of their calling (cf. 2 Th 1:5). Such a pronouncement underscores what Collins (1984:250) wrote about the role of God in 1 Thessalonians 'In each instance Paul explicitly cites the name of God, as if to affirm that it is God who is responsible for the ultimate realities of salvation even if these are effected through Jesus Christ'. This is also, *mutatis mutandis*, true of 2 Thessalonians.

34. Dunn (2006, 305–306) writes that the vivid visionary character of this passage reflects the genre of apocalypse with its notions of crisis, persecution, hope and fear expressed in 'inflated symbolism and assurance of God's vindication and vengeance'. He regards the reference to 'revelation' (2 Th 1:7; 2:3.6), 'mystery' (2 Th 2:7), the 'return' (2 Th 1:7) and the 'man of lawlessness' as examples of such apocalyptic language. This, he notes, explains its exaggerated character with an 'element of the grotesque'. He thinks that the lack of such language elsewhere in the Pauline letters means that Paul did not regard it 'as a constant feature of his gospel and theology'. It must be noted, though, how toned down Paul's language is when compared with the much more vengeful portrayal of judgment in Revelation.

28. In 2 Thessalonians 1 Paul changes the original sentence in Isaiah that speaks about a flight 'from the presence of the fear of the Lord and from the glory of his might' by omitting the phrase 'of the fear' (cf. Frame 1946:234–235; Malherbe 2000:403; but also the more critical remarks of Richard 1995:315).

29. This portrait of the heavenly entourage, different from 1 Thessalonians 4:16 (where only the voice of an archangel at the Lord's coming is present), intensifies the description of the *parousia*.

30. On the apocalyptic and mystical context of light (used together with glory), cf. Chibici-Revneanu (2007:407–408); but cf. further Van Houwelingen (2005:182); Malherbe (2000:400).

31. Cf. Segal (1999:261) for the apocalyptic nature of the term 'revelation'. 'Paul's references to apocalypses and visions, as well as heavenly ascent, put him squarely within apocalyptic tradition'. Note especially how Segal (1999:262) links this with Jewish mysticism.

only mentioned to describe them as the objects of the divine judgment, meted out to them because they rejected the gospel, but they are further portrayed as being deprived of a life in the glorious presence of the Lord.

This powerful portrait of Christ as divine judge of the end time is to be understood in the light of the saints' affliction which they have to endure and which Paul addresses paraenetically in this letter. Their journey of faith has not been an easy one. They are, however, reassured by Paul that their travails do not speak the last word. Eventually God will act and remove their opponents and the unbelievers. They can look forward to a transformation in glory, when their present affliction will come to an end. They can be comforted by the knowledge that they have been considered worthy of the kingdom in suffering, but they can also rest assured that the judge who will intervene on their behalf is the one who is powerful enough and determined to judge their opponents.³⁵ At the same time, this picture of judgement reminds them how important it is to remain faithful in their spiritual journey. They do not want to share the fate of those who do not believe and who will ultimately not see God. Their relationship with the divine, initiated by God and steered by God until the very end, is determined by the one who is infinitely more powerful than evil and who by (his) character rejects evil completely. If anything, all this has been proven by the life of Christ.

Salvation as experiencing the glorious presence of the divine

The future and its revelation of the presence of Christ are not only linked with judgement, but are also and especially combined with salvation. In 2 Thessalonians 1:10 (B) the attention shifts to the faithful and their salvation, which consists, as is implied by verse 9, of their sharing the divine presence. The future is thus the completion of what God had begun through Christ. The divine initiative finds its final consummation in the bringing in of the faithful into the presence of God. The faithful will experience what unbelievers will not have: they will be face to face with the Lord in his glorious, powerful presence (cf. also 1 Th 4:14, 17; 5:10; Frame 1946:235). The beginning of this verse's internal structure is also in the form of a parallelism. The parallelism once again emphasises the point and speaks in strong terms about Christ as Lord and about the consequences of accepting the gospel. These two now deserve more attention.

The glorification of Christ

First of all, though, this passage in 2 Thessalonians 1:10a suggests that the future is first and foremost about Christ's glorification. The future will be characterised by the Lord's glorification [ἐνδοξασθῆναι; (a)] and by wonder [θαυμασθῆναι³⁶ (b)] at his coming. In this sentence the motif of glory in verse 9 (cf. τῆς δόξης [of the glory]) is repeated in the verb ἐνδοξασθῆναι [to be glorified], stressing its importance.

35. This is why Paul can speak of the opponents as 'doomed to destruction' in 2 Thessalonians 2:10.

36. Bruce (1982:153) interprets this as 'to be marveled at in all those who have believed'.

Glory, as has already been indicated in some way previously, has the connotation of brightness and light (Lk 9 :29–32; 1 Cor 15:41), but is in the first instance a manifestation of the divine presence (Lk 2:8; Malherbe 2000:400).

The glorification of the saints

These remarks about the future return of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians 1:10 are about more than the glory of Christ. It is namely not only Christ who is glorified, but those who believe in Him also experience a glorification. Their glorious future is a consequence of their response to Paul's eschatological proclamation, as verse 10c spells out.³⁷ The future salvation speaks of a special relationship of the Lord with the saints [ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ] and the faithful [ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν]. It comprises their eternal fellowship with the Lord, continuing the special link which began with their conversion.

Christ's glory transforms the faithful and their situation completely. As is clear from 2 Thessalonians 2:14, God has called Christians to share in the glory of Christ.³⁸ This motif is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:12 where Paul also says that God calls believers to His kingdom and glory. That motif reappears in 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10 where it is developed in somewhat more detail and where the glory is regarded as a matter of the future. Paul wishes to explain through this motif how the believing community will enjoy the divine presence and will be transformed (1 Th 4:17). The Lord is glorified in and admired by the believers who participate in the divine glory. The glory of the Lord will be visible in them (cf. Is 49:3; Menken 1994:92).³⁹

The exalted Christ thus shares his glorious existence with the faithful in a way that reminds one of Paul's mystical soteriology. In it Paul reflects on Christ as the second Adam 'where Christ is envisaged as a corporate person 'in' whom believers can find themselves' (Dunn 2006:314). They are saved to be with and to become like the exalted Christ. Newman (1992:242) thus noted that the Lord will through glory 'reconfigure his people. Judgment and suffering will be replaced by a revelation of Glory, a manifestation which will effect a second exodus: a restoration and recreation'. It is a divine glory in which humanity will have a share.⁴⁰

37. The decisive role of faith in the Thessalonian correspondence has been worked out well by Giblin (1967). But cf. also Ridderbos (1966:253–260), especially his remarks on the new creation as faith and the close connection between faith, the proclamation of the gospel and the divine election in Pauline literature.

38. One should read this remark in the light of the Old Testament which regards the glory of Yahweh as renewing and transforming existence. Cf. also Romans 8:17–18; Philippians 3:21; Newman (1992:60–61); Malherbe (2000:404).

39. For the way in which Paul considers the post-resurrection body of Christ as the same body that the believer will use to travel to heaven, cf. Segal (1999:267). He notes that this body 'is a spiritual presence that is identical with the end of time' as it is portrayed in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18.

40. Chibici-Revneanu (2007:459) writes about the glory motif from a tradition historical point of view. She comments that the future revelation of the divine glory (cf. for this 2 Th 1:9–10) will bring a reversal in history. 'Die Gotteszugehörigkeit der Herrlichkeit soll in diesem Ereignis letztgültig bestätigt werden, was auch bedeutet: dass dieses Erscheinen der δόξα diejenigen ins Recht setzen wird, die sich dieser Zuordnung nicht verschlossen hatten, hingegen für alle jene, die δόξα statt dessen für sich selbst beanspruchten, Gericht und Überführung meint'. Paul's remarks about the glory of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 thus confirm what he said in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 about the man of lawlessness who claims divine glory.

Sharing the divine presence

The glorious future is not only about rest after the end of suffering (2 Th 1:7) and of experiencing the divine presence, but it is also about *sharing* the divine presence in community,⁴¹ as in 1 Thessalonians, the end time will be characterised by the believers sharing the divine presence 'with each other' (cf. the σύν αὐτοῖς in 1 Th 4:17). In 2 Thessalonians 1:6–7 Paul used the significant phrase μεθ' ἡμῶν [with us] to express how his and the believers' future will be a time of sharing God's blessings and the divine presence with each other.⁴² Paul and the Thessalonians have shared their suffering with a long list of believers – from the prophets, Jesus, Judean Christians to later groups. They will experience a 'future fellowship in "rest" or "relief" from this suffering', but they will also be glorified in power when they all together experience the Lord's presence (Chibici-Revneanu 2007:459–460).

This sharing of the divine presence is also articulated in 2 Thessalonians 2 where Paul focuses on matters regarding the *parousia*. At the beginning of this passage (cf. 2 Th 2:1), Paul announces as its topos: ὑπὲρ τῆς παρουσίας τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡμῶν ἐπισυναγωγῆς ἐπ' αὐτόν [concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him]. It is a discussion of the problem about the Day of the Lord which some say has already come.⁴³ Noteworthy, though, is how in the later discussion (2 Th 2:8) Paul links the *parousia* to 'the appearance/splendor of his coming' [τῆ ἐπιφάνεια τῆς παρουσίας] – a description which recalls the glorification of 2 Thessalonians 1:10.⁴⁴ This description of a splendid *parousia* together with the consistent use of the title 'Lord', already points to the special nature of this future event and to the exalted status of the Lord.⁴⁵ But, also as in 2 Thessalonians 1:10, the *parousia* or appearance of the Lord has to do with more than the status of the Lord. It is also about the 'being gathered' to the Lord. The indicator ὑπὲρ [concerning] in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 governs two eschatological issues that Paul wishes to address. He refers not only to the *parousia* (τῆς παρουσίας [of the coming]), but, secondly also to 'our being gathered to him'⁴⁶ [ἡμῶν ἐπισυναγωγῆς ἐπ' αὐτόν].

The word ἐπισυναγωγή is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in Hebrews 10:25 where it indicates the assembly of the church; it normally means assembling with someone. Here, however, the word has an eschatological meaning because of its combination with the *parousia* motif.

41. Cf. also Lüdemann (1984:235) who notes that an exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 reveals an emphasis on future fellowship which finds its cause in Christ's death and resurrection. This is also valid for 2 Thessalonians.

42. Richard (1995:306): 'By use of the expression "with us" the author underscores the common lot of Christians whether in suffering ... or in obtaining eternal rest'.

43. Nicholl (2004:119ff.) points out several arguments to prove the co-referentiality of the *parousia* and the Day of the Lord.

44. The Greek word ἐπιφάνεια can be synonymous to παρουσία, but it is mostly used in Hellenistic contexts for divine appearances (Frame 1946:266; Malherbe 2000:424; Van Houwelingen 2005:203).

45. Paul refers more often to the word *parousia* in 2 Thessalonians than in 1 Thessalonians. Cf. also Van Houwelingen (2005:190).

46. Malherbe (2000:415) notes how the article τῆς combines both the *parousia* and the gathering, 'showing that they are closely related in his thinking'.

In many Jewish texts the word traditionally refers to 'the constant hope of the Jews that their scattered brethren would be gathered together in Palestine' (Frame 1946:245; Van Houwelingen 2005:190; cf. Is 27:13; Sir 36:13; 2 Macc 2:7.18) and is taken over in Christian apocalypses (cf. also Mk 13:27). In the case of 2 Thessalonians 2:1, however, there is no such geographical location for the gathering, but, in line with Paul's Christological interest, it refers to a gathering with a person. The faithful will be gathered to the Lord and will be restored in full community with him. It is a pronouncement which reminds one of 1 Thessalonians 4:14 ('God will bring believers with Jesus') and 1 Thessalonians 5:10 ('believers will live with Him').

Paul qualifies the great reversal, therefore, not only in terms of God's glorious actions in Christ, but also from a human perspective, pointing out that it consists of 'our', that is, his and the believers' reunion with the Lord. Once again there is a mystical quality to this passage. It is about the future reunion with the Lord which can only be expressed in metaphorical language, taken from apocalyptic traditions. The reunion affects those who follow the Lord, but it involves them as a community and as the body of the Lord. Paul is therefore referring to the meeting with the Lord and the subsequent being with him (Malherbe 2000:415). The *parousia* implies the inauguration of the full community of believers with each other and the divine in the future and especially their mystical unity with Christ. They are being assembled to the Lord and will be the assembly of God.

Conclusion

The future existence of believers as mystical reunion with Christ in 2 Thessalonians is to be understood within the wider framework of Pauline thought. It has close links with Paul's perspective on the resurrection. Paul's thought in 2 Thessalonians is decisively Christological in nature. The transformation of believers is grounded in the life of Christ and is brought about by Paul's proclamation of the Gospel which is the 'gospel of our Lord Jesus' (2 Th 1:9) that brought them to faith and inspired them to endure (2 Th 1:3–4).

The glorification of the Lord in the believers forms a starting point for later perspectives in Pauline thought. Philippians 3:20–21 Paul speaks of Christ who will come 'from heaven' as deliverer and transform the body of the saints in a form like that of his own glorious body since the resurrection. Present experiences of affliction cannot obscure the eschatological expectation of future glorification (cf. also 2 Cor 4:17). Paul elsewhere also refers to the 'enemies of the cross of Christ' who are heading for destruction (Phlp 3:19; cf. also 2 Cor 4:3), like the opponents of the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 1.

Another expression of this link with the resurrection is found in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4 where Paul writes that God who raised Jesus will also raise believers 'and will bring us to his presence' (2 Cor 4:14; cf. 4:7). For Paul the risen Christ has a body of glory that he received at the resurrection (Phlp 3:20–21). It is the type of body that God will give the faithful (2 Cor 3:18–4:6). Although believers already share the glory,

they will only experience it fully at the final consummation.⁴⁷ Paul, invoking the narrative horizon of Jewish scriptures about divine visitations in the past and the present, sees Jesus as the one who mediates the divine glory of the future. As Newman (1992) writes:

Parallel to and in the sequence of God's past revelation of Glory, the coming, life, death and resurrection of Jesus mediated Glory. In hearing and believing the message of Jesus, the resurrection power of God, his Glory, engages the believer and enacts the process of eschatological transformation, a process which ultimately resolves when the believer is finally transformed into the very image of the Son.

(Newman 1992:245)

The future glory continues the glory of the resurrection. The transformation that began with the resurrection is finally completed with the Lord's return (Eph 3:16; Phlp 4:19; Col 1:11; Newman 1992:227–228). In Philippians 3:21 the indwelling of the exalted Jesus is also about future glorification: the believer lives in the certain hope of glory (Rm 5:21; Col 1:27b; Rm 8:19). In some cases Paul can even say believers must share suffering in order to share Christ's glory (Rm 8:17). In that case there is a mystical quality to the suffering of the saints: in their suffering they are sharing the suffering of Christ.

Paul's language about the future existence of the believers is sober. It speaks of what is difficult to express in human language. That is why Paul depends on symbolic language, often taken from his sacred traditions. Segal (1999:263–264), writing about Paul's transformation mysticism, observes that Paul uses mystical-apocalyptic language to describe the resurrected Jesus and the future state of believers, employing motifs like form, image, light or darkness, glory and being in Christ.⁴⁸ Paul's remarks reflect the fulfilment of Daniel 12:1–3, which is about the transformation of the righteous and their leaders, as well as Ezekiel 1:28. He identifies the glory of the Lord, the human-shaped figure on the throne or the angel of Yahweh with Christ, 'in whom the Christian faithful dwell'.⁴⁹ The portrait of the mystical union of the faithful with Christ and of their future glorious existence in the divine presence in 2 Thessalonians is, therefore, an early indication and version of what Paul would present elsewhere in his letters in more detail.

Although Paul's understanding of the believers' future participation in the glorious existence of Christ is conceived of in terms of his understanding of the resurrection, Hebrew Scriptures and his own faith experience,⁵⁰ it is also conceptualised in terms of the context of the Thessalonians.

47.Cf. Malherbe (2000:412–413) in this regard.

48.Glory and light belong together in Paul's thought, to such an extent that in 2 Corinthians 4:4–5 there is a reference to the glory of Christ who is the light. Christ, it is affirmed, is the image of God and himself has glory (cf. also 2 Cor 3:18). 2 Corinthians 4:6 even speaks of the light which is knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

49.Cf. also Newman (1992:180).

50.For Segal (1999:263–264) Paul's understanding is based on his own mystical experience. 'Paul through mystical ecstasy was transformed into the image of the resurrected Christ. Paul now offers this process of transformation for all who believe in Christ'.

In the second letter to them, Paul is concerned about the increasing intensity of their affliction. Like in 1 Thessalonians, Paul wishes to reassure them that their present situation must be viewed in light of the future. He reassures his readers that those who harm them will, as was already indicated in 1 Thessalonians 5:3, bear the consequences of their actions. They will be destroyed at the glorious return of the Lord. In contrast to their 'everlasting' destruction and their being shut out from the presence of the Lord (2 Th 1:9), believers will ultimately marvel at and share the powerful and glorious return of the Lord (2 Th 1:9–10). What they experienced when they encountered the resurrected Christ in the proclamation of Paul, will ultimately be given to them in abundance and in perfection. His continued proclamation to them thus exhorts them to look beyond their present affliction to their deeper, enduring relationship with God in Christ.

It is at this point that Paul further develops his pronouncements of 1 Thessalonians on the eternal presence of saints with the Lord. The believers, together with Paul, will find 'relief' from their persecution at the *parousia* (2 Th 1:7). In addition, they can rest assured that they who have been chosen for salvation (2 Th 2:13) and who have responded positively to Paul's proclamation, also have been called to 'share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ' (2 Th 2:14). In 2 Thessalonians, then, Paul stresses with some detail and intensity the future glory in which the believers will share. Ultimately, Paul finds it important that the *parousia* is all about the future union with God – the being gathered with the Lord in glory (2 Th 2:1). Their faith is about transformation in glory. The power of their faith in the resurrected Christ is only the beginning. It foreshadows what awaits them as God reveals the fullness of the gospel. One can only imagine how powerful the message must have been for those who were afflicted and were suffering.

Acknowledgement

With this contribution I would like to honour Andries van Aarde, colleague and friend of several decades, for his creative work in the field of New Testament Studies, but also for his dedication and hard work as long-standing editor of *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* through which he contributed in a meaningful way to promoting scholarship in our field and in theology as a discipline.

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