

The Great Reunion: The Meaning and Significance of the “Word of the Lord” in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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The “word of the Lord,” referred to in 1 Thessalonians 4, has always intrigued me. Reading the Bible when I was still a schoolboy, I wondered when the apostle Paul could have spoken with Jesus and where the Lord whispered his word into Paul’s ears. What else could be the source of this divine word, and, even more important, what could the content of it be? These questions continued to puzzle me. In his recent dissertation, the Dutch minister Dirk Visser, who graduated in South Africa after writing on a theme from the letters to the Thessalonians, remarks on this point that, essentially, it does not matter for the exegesis of 4:15-17 because our focus has to be on how these verses function with respect to the first readers (according to him, Paul is answering a question of the Thessalonians).¹ Remarks like this, however, are not very helpful to curious schoolboys such as I was.

The main questions concerning source and content are closely intertwined here. Two major proposals appear to dominate the scholarly discussion. First, the “word” is seen to be verse 15b, while verses 16-17 are an explanation of it. Second, verses 16-17 are seen to be the “word,” while verse 15b is a summary in advance. However, no consensus has been reached. This discussion is not really fruitful. A better way out of the problems is to have a fresh look at the passage as a whole. The text deals with a theme that I would call “the great reunion.” Paul, Silas, and Timothy, the three authors of the two letters to the Thessalonians,² state that all believers, both the dead and the living, will be brought

¹ Dirk Visser, *Paraklese in het perspectief van de parousie* (Heerenveen: Groen, 2003), 136.

² Both in 1 and in 2 Thessalonians, the first person plural is used continually. The three men from the prescript of the letters (note the construction with two conjunctions in the Greek: Παῦλος καὶ Σιλβανὸς καὶ Τιμόθεος are writing as “we.” They are the authors, Paul being the first one mentioned. There are only five exceptions in these letters where Paul prefers to use the singular “I” (1 Thess. 2:18; 3:5; 5:27; 2 Thess. 2:5; 3:17). From a closer look at these texts, it appears that the apostle had special reasons to do so. Paul steps forward with a message because he feels a personal responsibility for the apostolic mission in Macedonia. See P. H. R. van Houwelingen, *Tessalonicenzen: Voortgezet basisonderwijs* (Kampen: Kok, 2-2005), 18-23, referring to Samuel Byrskog, “Co-Senders, Co-Authors and Paul’s Use of the First Person Plural,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 87 (1996): 230-50. Sometimes, too, the first person plural is used in a confessional statement.

together at the second coming of Jesus Christ. In my view, that particular eschatological theme is the main key to understanding the pericope and to discovering both the source and the content of the word of the Lord. This article will argue that the heart of the pericope consists of a reference to the so-called eschatological discourse of Jesus Christ. A pronouncement of the Lord himself, then, is preceded by a confessional statement and followed by a prophetic explanation. The whole textual unit aims to stimulate the Thessalonian congregation into expecting the great reunion.

The Lord's Future

Paul, Silas, and Timothy give a detailed discussion of the Christian expectation of the future. They had already brought up this subject in the first section of their letter (1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13), but the second section deals with two problems with which the Thessalonians apparently were intensely occupied. Perhaps Timothy had given a report about these points after he had visited the church in Thessalonica. The first problem has to do with the lot of those who have died, and especially with their position at the second coming (1 Thess. 4:13-18). The second problem concerns the length of the period in which the second coming is to be expected (1 Thess. 5:1-11). Nowhere else in the Pauline letters is eschatology dealt with at such length as here.

Wilcke correctly notes that the two pericopes have a parallel structure.³ The problem is set forth (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13 with 5:1), then a fundamental response is immediately given (cf. 1 Thess. 4:14 with 5:2), followed by a more detailed discussion (cf. 1 Thess. 4:15-17 with 5:3-10), and concluded with a summons to comfort each other (cf. 1 Thess. 4:18 with 5:11). What may Christians expect from the future of the Lord? At his return, he will gather all believers to be with him forever, and his coming is as unexpected as a thief in the night.

In what follows, an exegetical sketch will be provided of the whole pericope of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, using headings that identify the content:

Verses 13-14:	Not Without Hope
Verse 15a:	A Word to Be Continued
Verses 15b-17:	Forever Together
Verse 18:	Shared Words

The exegesis will be followed by a short discussion of several expectations concerning a supposed rapture of believers, which have been made on the basis of this pericope.

³ Hans-Alwin Wilcke, *Das Problem eines messianischen Zwischenreichs bei Paulus* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1967), 112. See also Raymond F. Collins, *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians* (Leuven: University Press, 1984), 154-55. Unfortunately, the implications of this structural parallel have been overlooked by Seyoon Kim, "The Jesus Tradition in 1 Thess. 4.13-5.11," *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002): 225-42.

Not Without Hope (verses 13-14)

After briefly addressing the readers, the writers switch to another subject. They do not want their brothers and sisters left in uncertainty concerning those who “sleep.” In the ancient world, the image of sleep was a widespread euphemism for death.⁴ When they are dead, after all, people rest in peace. The Bible, too, can speak of death as an intensified sleep, both in the Old Testament (Gen. 47:30; Deut. 31:16; Job 14:10-12; Ps. 13:3; 1 Kings 22:40; Jer. 51:39; Dan. 12:2) and in the New Testament (Mark 5:39; Matt. 27:52; John 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 2 Peter 3:4). The letters of Paul are no exception (1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51). The sleepers are the dead Christians from Thessalonica.⁵

The prophecy of Daniel 12:2 links sleeping with waking, which cautiously arouses an expectation that the dead will live again: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” Although this expectation was not undisputed within Judaism (Pharisees and Sadducees differed), Paul proclaimed to the Sanhedrin his firm conviction as a Pharisee that the dead would one day rise (see Acts 23:6-8). The more the term *sleeping* is colored by the Christian faith, the more hope it gives.

Where this hope is lacking, people are in danger of falling back into paganism. Non-Christians are here designated as “the rest” (οἱ λοιποί: cf. Eph. 2:3, 12-13). Many people in Thessalonica do not know God but are outsiders who live in a totally different way than befits the members of the congregation (1 Thess. 4:5, 12; 5:6). Therefore, they also live without hope, that is to say, without the hopeful expectation that the dead will one day rise. When death strikes in their midst, they can do nothing other than express their feelings of dismay and deep grief.⁶ Many monuments and inscriptions on graves from the ancient world bear witness to that.

Such need not be the case for the readers of this letter. Naturally, Christians also grieve for the dead. Paul himself was afraid that his mortally ill coworker Epaphroditus would die, and about his healing he says that it spared him new grief (Phil. 2:27). The Thessalonians have been converted to the living and true God. They believe that God’s Son has died but also has risen again.

⁴ Paul Hoffmann, *Die Toten in Christus: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchung zur paulinischen Eschatologie* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1966), 186-206.

⁵ Paul uses a variety of Greek verbal forms to indicate the future of these people. Some manuscripts in 1 Thess. 4:13 have the present form κοιμώμενοι; other manuscripts have the perfect κοιμημένοι (as in 1 Cor. 15:20). The aorist κοιμηθέντες is found once in 1 Cor. 15:18 and twice in 1 Thess. 4:14-15. One could show the significance of these tenses by speaking of them, respectively, as those who fall asleep, those who are asleep, and those who sleep. However, apparently these are merely stylistic (textual) variants.

⁶ As a well-known quotation from the ancient writer Theocritus (third century B.C.) says: “Hopes are for the living, without hope are the dead” (*Idylls* 4.42).

Therefore their grief for the dead will be different from that of the others. There is hope: Christians, after all, expect the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. They need never despair.

What then was the precise problem for the Thessalonians? Were they not fully informed about the resurrection, or could they not comprehend it fully? There have been various attempts to answer these questions.

One option is that the missionary trio had not spoken at all about the resurrection when they visited Thessalonica. Perhaps there had been no opportunity to do so during the relatively short stay of Paul and his travel companions. Or perhaps this subject remained in the background because the thinking of the apostle on this point was still developing, or because he supposed that the second coming was near.⁷ Nevertheless, the Thessalonians' problem need not have arisen through a lack of information. It has to do, rather, with their ability to comprehend or to apply what they have learned.

In the second place, people have thought of the influence of false teachers—for example, from gnostic circles. With their spiritualizing ideas, they could have sown doubt in the Thessalonian church concerning the bodily resurrection.⁸ From Paul's rejection of their view in verse 15b, we could derive what their standpoint approximately must have been. Paraphrased: "We who are (spiritually) living have precedence over the dead." However, elsewhere in this letter, there is no polemic against the false teachers, and verse 15b does not dispute gnostic views but rather gives a prophetic explanation of the word of the Lord.

Third, the dead could be Christian martyrs who lost their lives in a bloody persecution in Thessalonica. Their death would have caused the church great difficulty and uncertainty.⁹ Now from 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, it appears that the Christians in the Macedonian capital city did indeed have much to endure from their fellow citizens, but there was no talk of organized persecution. It is questionable whether we can take the expression *sleeping through Jesus* as a characterization of Christian martyrs without doing violence to the grammatical construction.

⁷ Willi Marxsen, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1979); Franz Laub, *Eschatologische Verkündigung und Lebensgestaltung nach Paulus. Eine Untersuchung zum wirken des Apostels beim Aufbau der Gemeinde in Thessalonike* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1973); Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, "Wachten op Jezus. De gemeente van Tessalonica," in *Vroegchristelijke gemeenten tussen werkelijkheid en ideaal*, ed. J. Delobel et al. (Kampen: Kok, 2001), 14-29.

⁸ W. Lütgert, "Die Vollkommenen im Philipperbrief und die Enthusiasten in Thessalonich," *Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie* 13 (1909): 547-654; Walter Schmithals, *Paulus und die Gnostiker: Untersuchungen zu den Paulusbriefen* (Hamburg: Reich, 1965); Wolfgang Harnisch, *Eschatologische Existenz. Ein exegetischer Beitrag zum Sachanliegen von 1. Thessalonicher 4,13-5,11* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973).

⁹ G. Wohlenberg, *Der erste und zweite Thessalonicherbrief* (Leipzig: Deichert, 2-1909); James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912); Karl P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 336-56.

For a proper understanding, we must take the Gentile background of the Thessalonians into account.¹⁰ They were not at all conversant with the idea of a bodily resurrection.¹¹ There was a deep-rooted longing for a continued existence after death. In Macedonia, people honored Egyptian life-gods such as Isis and Serapis, who could, without difficulty, be identified with Demeter and Dionysius respectively. Furthermore, we must recall that people in the ancient world did not have a high life-expectancy. On account of the death of children, the average lifespan was perhaps about thirty years. Scarcely five percent of the populace reached fifty years of age. People thus lived in the continual presence of death, and the usual platitudes meant to provide comfort after the passing away of a loved one only intensified grief.

The problem of the Thessalonians was not the resurrection as such. From what follows, we can see how everything is in the framework of the expectation of Jesus' return in glory.¹² Verse 15b indicates that what they feared was the living leaving behind the dead. Could the sleeping believers be present at the coming of Jesus Christ from the beginning? Would they not be brought to life only at a later stage? Then, though, there would be a sort of difference in status between those who, at Christ's coming, were still living and those who had already died. This thought made the Thessalonians sad and despairing. Paul, Silas, and Timothy discuss this. According to them, it is in any case not true that the living will precede the sleeping when the Lord returns. First those who died in Christ will be raised and then the living will go together with them to meet him.¹³

The argument is introduced by a pronouncement of faith in the *we* form: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again." This must have been an old confession, derived from the apostolic tradition (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4).¹⁴ The wording

¹⁰ Charles Edson, "Cults of Thessalonica," *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (1948): 153-204; Peter Müller, *Anfänge der Paulusschule: Dargestellt am zweiten Thessalonicherbrief und am Kolosserbrief* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1988); Rainer Riesner, *Die Frühzeit des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994).

¹¹ For ample documentation, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 32-84.

¹² Wilcke, *Das Problem eines messianischen Zwischenreichs bei Paulus*, 121-22; Niels Hyldahl, "Auferstehung Christi-Auferstehung der Toten (1 Thess. 4,13-18)," in *Die Paulinische Literatur und Theologie*, ed. S. Pedersen (Aarhus: Forlaget Aros, 1980), 119-35.

¹³ A. F. J. Klijn, "1 Thessalonians 4.13-18 and Its Background in Apocalyptic Literature," in *Paul and Paulinism*, ed. M. D. Hooker and G. S. Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), 67-73, has described how both the question and the reaction to it often appear in texts with an apocalyptic character. It was regarded as a great privilege to be able to experience the end of the world. All the righteous would then in the same measure share in the coming events (4 Ezra 5:41-45; 13:16-24; Apocalypse of Baruch 30:1-2; Pseudo-Philo, *Bible History* 19.12). With regard to the divine final judgment there is no question of earlier or later. According to what people expected, everything would take place simultaneously.

¹⁴ See Collins, *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians*, 158; 225-26; 261-63.

is in some ways remarkable.¹⁵ The Lord is given his personal name, the name Jesus, and not the title Christ (the same in 1 Thess. 1:9b-10). This fact underscores the personal bond between Jesus and the dead. Further, it is striking that this confession says “rose again” (ἀνέστη) and not “woke up” (ἐγήγερται), which is much more common in Paul. The same is true, according to verse 16, of those who have died in Christ, but who at his coming will again arise (ἀναστήσονται). At this point, too, there is evidently a close relationship between Jesus and the believers who have passed away. Even by death that bond is not broken.

Therefore, the Thessalonians must keep the consistency of the Christian faith in view. The resurrection of the dead is anchored in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Jesus died and rose again, so also the believers died, and they will rise as he did. As a living Jesus is expected, the dead will also live and return. That will happen in this manner: first they are raised from the dead. Then, when the Lord comes, God will gather all believers to him, both the living and the dead. The day of the Lord is thus the day of the great gathering.¹⁶

A Word to Be Continued (verse 15a)

Paul, Silas, and Timothy appeal explicitly to a word of the Lord, but the exegetes find this very hard to interpret. All agree that the Lord is Jesus.¹⁷ Which word of his is in view here? In broad strokes, we can distinguish three different views:

¹⁵ This fact has caused many commentators to conclude that the authors here are citing confessional material of the early church.

¹⁶ The wording of verse 14 falters somewhat. Apart from the fact that the first half of the sentence (protasis) and the last half of the sentence (apodosis) do not dovetail well with each other, the function of διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ in verse 14b is unclear. This seems to be a further specification of the sleeping ones, on account of the parallelism of the sentence (J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul from Unpublished Commentaries* [Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, s.a.], 64). However, what are we to understand by “sleeping through Jesus”? Was Jesus in one way or another responsible for their death? Does this have to do with Christian martyrs, or does the name *Jesus* point to the resurrection of these people? In verse 16 and in 1 Corinthians 15:18, however, in a comparable context, there is talk of people who are sleeping or who died *in Christ*. Grammatically, the words διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ therefore are better linked with the following verb: God will gather the sleepers by means of Jesus (cf. F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* [Waco: Word, 1982]; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 2000]). To clarify the awkward sentence structure, we can point to the fact that the writers, both in verse 14a and in verse 14b, have used existing formulations.

¹⁷ With the exception of Sebastian Schneider, *Vollendung des Auferstehens. Eine exegetische Untersuchung von 1 Kor 15,51-52 und 1 Thess 4,13-18* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2005), 231-57, who refers to the expression ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου as the Septuagintal translation of יהוה דבר for speaking on the authority of YHWH (particularly in 1 Kings 13:32; 21:35 LXX). So the word of the Lord would be a prophetic word of God. However, his argument that verse 16a describes a theophany is not convincing. This interpretation of the Greek construction with ἐν + dative does not fit into the concluding reference to the preceding words (verse 18: ἐν τοῖς λόγοις τούτοις).

1. The word of the Lord is taken as a pronouncement of the earthly Jesus, which is not preserved in the gospel tradition. So, we may think of an unwritten word (cf. Acts 20:35; 1 Cor. 7:10; 9:14) or perhaps an apocryphal word.¹⁸
2. The word of the Lord is taken as a pronouncement on behalf of the heavenly Jesus made by a prophet in the church. Paul and Silas were recognized as prophets, and perhaps they had received a special revelation from the Lord (Acts 13:1; 15:32).¹⁹
3. The word of the Lord is taken in a general sense (cf. 1 Thess. 1:8; 2 Thess. 3:1). We are dealing, then, with a summary of what Jesus taught about the lot of the dead: the resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous and the gathering of the elect.²⁰

Although none of these views is entirely without problems, one can still discover an element of truth in each of them.

The first view is made difficult to accept by the fact that the word of the Lord has not been preserved in Scripture. No one can provide evidence for it. Nevertheless, these people have correctly pointed to a specific pronouncement by Jesus.

The second view has the difficulty that a word of the Lord need not be identical with a prophecy. In 2 Thessalonians 2:2, spiritual pronouncement and word are distinguished from each other. Nevertheless, it is possible that in verses 15b-17 prophetic words are being quoted.

The third view overlooks the fact that a specific problem cannot be solved with a general reference. Nevertheless, it does appear to be correct that such a reference receives more weight through the personal authority of the Lord.

Almost all commentaries start with the idea that the content of the word of the Lord has to stand in verses 15b-17. Those verses are, as a whole, worded in the first person plural. The use of the *we* form fits better with the style of a letter than with a cited pronouncement from Jesus Christ. When the Lord is named, it is not to cite him but only to say something about him. Is it then cor-

¹⁸ Representatives of this view are the commentaries of Wohlenberg, *Der erste und zweite Thessalonicherbrief*; Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*; and Eduard Verhoef, *De brieven aan de Tessalonicenzen* (Kampen: Kok, 1998).

¹⁹ Representatives of this view are the commentaries of Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*; E. von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe*. Nachdruck der Ausgabe von 1909. Mit einem Literaturverzeichnis von Otto Merk herausgegeben von Ferdinand Hahn (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974); and Simon Légasse, *Les Épîtres de Paul aux Thessaloniens* (Paris: Cerf, 1999).

²⁰ Representatives of this view are the commentaries of B. Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1956); Traugott Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher* (Zürich: Benziger, 1986); and Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistle to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

rect to seek the word in what follows? Close scrutiny of the pericope supplies five arguments that encourage us to think rather of what precedes this statement.

1. As Richard has noted, the conjunctive phrase *τοῦτο γάρ* (this, after all) functions in Paul's letters not as an introduction but as a conclusion (2 Cor. 8:10; 1 Thess. 4:3; 5:18).²¹ This would mean that verse 15a supplies a kind of argument for verse 14.
2. The sentence construction of verse 14 is difficult. It seems as if two different sentence fragments were joined or inserted into the argument. This difficult construction can be explained as an adaptation of a specific pronouncement. Was this perhaps the word of the Lord?
3. From the parallel between the two pericopes about the coming of the Lord, it appears that a problematic issue is first supplied with a fundamental reaction (1 Thess. 4:14 and 5:2) and then this is worked out further (1 Thess. 4:15-17 and 5:3-10).
4. In response to a specific problem concerning the coming of the Lord, 1 Thessalonians 5:2 also cites a pronouncement that Jesus Christ had made, only it is not explicitly stated that it is a word of the Lord. The Thessalonians knew very well that he would come like a thief.
5. "Because this we say to you with a word of the Lord" (verse 15b)—what we then *say* is not the same as the *word* of the Lord but is based on it. In verse 18, which links up with this verse, this is all impressed upon the church: "Comfort each other, then, with these *words*."

The preceding leads to the conclusion that verse 14 contains the word of the Lord, followed by a prophetic explanation of it by the writers of the letter (in particular Paul and Silas) interpreting it and developing an argument.²² This complete material must then be transmitted within the congregation. In this way, the word of the Lord is made increasingly clear and is spread further. Everything, however, comes back to a specific pronouncement such as that which appears at the beginning: "God will bring the sleepers with him through Jesus." We thus discover in 4:14-18 the following subdivision:

Basis	Word of the Lord	Verses 14b-15a
Outworking	Prophetic words	Verses 15b-17
Application	Comforting words in the congregation	Verse 18

²¹ Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 240. His translation of 1 Thess. 4:3 runs as follows: "The above, then, is God's will, namely, your holiness" (186-87).

²² Cf. Helmut Merklein, "Der Theologe als Prophet: zur Funktion prophetischen Redens im theologischen Diskurs des Paulus," *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 402-29, who observes a structural parallel between 1 Thess. 4:15-18 and 1 Cor. 15:50-58, in his opinion based on the *kerygma* of 1 Thess. 4:14a and 1 Cor. 15:3b-5, respectively.

A support for this exegesis can be found in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, where our pericope is summarized in the following sentence: "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him."²³

When did Jesus speak about this future gathering, and against what background must his pronouncement be understood? Starting with the latter, in the Old Testament, there existed the explicit expectation that God's chosen people, scattered and spread over the whole world, would someday be gathered again ([ἐπι]συναγάγειν) by the eternal one himself. We find this theme with all kinds of variations in the books of Moses (Deut. 30:4), in various prophets (Isa. 11:12; 27:12-13; Ezek. 39:27; Zech. 2:10 LXX), and in several Psalms (Pss. 106:47; 147:2).

In the later Jewish apocalyptic, this motif of gathering has a prominent place, as appears from diverse passages in the apocryphal books (Tob. 13:15; Bar. 5:5-9; 2 Macc. 2:7-8) and in the pseudepigrapha (1 Enoch 57; Psalms of Solomon 11:2-3; 17:26). When God has mercy on Israel in the great future, the whole family of the righteous everywhere will be gathered together from all points of the compass. People expected to be restored ultimately as a people. With his own hands, the eternal one would undo the diaspora and reunite the holy nation.

The tenth prayer of the Jewish *Eighteen Benedictions*, then, runs as follows: "Proclaim our liberation with the great trumpet, and raise a banner to gather together our dispersed, and assemble us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed art thou, Lord, who gatherest the banished of thy people Israel!"²⁴ In his own person, Jesus brings this widespread expectation of his people Israel to fulfilment because he reveals himself as the Son of Man through whom God will restore all things and complete them. According to Daniel 7, the gathering of the one nation was promised in connection with this Son of Man. In his eschatological discourse, Jesus had connected that worldwide gathering with his coming: "They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky,

²³ Other references to a word of Jesus from the gospel tradition concern the coming of the Son of Man with his holy angels (Mark), his appearing soon (Matthew, Luke), or his promise to return to the world and raise the dead to life (John). There is a great diversity of suggestions, and it is far from simple to make the alleged parallel clear. All of the conflict about this in the exegetical literature itself makes us suppose that we are not on the right track. See, for example, Robert H. Gundry, "The Hellenization of Dominical Tradition and the Christianization of Jewish Tradition in the Eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 161-78; J. Ramsey Michaels, "Everything that Rises Must Converge: Paul's Word from the Lord," in *To Tell the Mystery: Essays on New Testament Eschatology in Honor of Robert H. Gundry*, ed. Th. E. Schmidt and M. Silva (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 182-95; and against this the skepticism of F. Neirynck, "Paul and the Sayings of Jesus," in *L'apôtre Paul. Personnalité, style et conception du ministère*, ed. A. Vanhoye (Leuven: Peeters, 1986), 265-321.

²⁴ For the *Shemoneh Esreh* or *Amidah* see Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ: A New English Edition*, vol. 2, ed. Geza Vermes, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 454-63.

power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather (ἐπισυναΐξουσιν) his elect from the four winds, from the one end of the heavens to the other” (Matt. 24:30b-31). “At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather (ἐπισυναΐξει) his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens” (Mark 13:26-27). The coming of the Son of Man will unveil his divine glory. We hear of a coming on the clouds, a glorious trumpet blast, and a sending of angels to gather all the chosen ones. What is remarkable is the double perspective: Those chosen ones shall not only be gathered from the earth but also from the heaven. At the second coming, those are the ones who are still living on earth, but the dead are in heaven. The dead will be raised and then they will be reunited with the living. If we take the expression “from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens” literally, then this could be the meaning.²⁵ Jesus indicates that he will fulfill the old expectation. He is the Son of Man who comes on the clouds of heaven and who will realize what God has promised: bringing all the chosen ones together and uniting them into one nation.

Precisely this point was problematical for the Thessalonians. Many members of the church will have asked themselves: Are we finished with the dead? Are they separated from us forever? Will they, then, not share in glory together with us in the future? From these questions, uncertainty arose about those who were asleep, that is, about their status when the Lord comes.

The first reaction to this problem in the first letter to the Thessalonians is a reference to something that Jesus himself had said about the great reunion. God will bring the sleeping ones with him (ἔξει σὺν αὐτῷ: 1 Thess. 4:14). Paul and Silas explain this word of the Lord in a prophetic manner. Those who have died in Christ will first rise and, together with them, we will go to meet the Lord in order to be with him always. The future of the Lord is the moment of the great reunion, both with each other and with Christ. Therefore let people in the church comfort each other with these words.

The second letter to the Thessalonians summarizes this unit of apostolic instruction and characterizes it as comfort concerning the coming (παρουσία: presence) of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering with him (ἐπισυναγωγή). The three writers point out the danger that their readers in Thessalonica will have their minds shaken by these things, which would produce unrest (2 Thess. 2:1-3a). Paul reminds them, then, of his verbal instruction, as he had regularly given it to the church when he was personally in their midst (2 Thess. 2:5).²⁶

²⁵ Jakob van Bruggen, *Marcus: Het evangelie volgens Petrus* (Kampen: Kok, 3-2000), 316.

²⁶ For another application of the motif of the gathering around Jesus Christ, see also John 11:51-52. There the assembling of the new people of God from the Jews and Gentiles is interpreted by the evangelist as the fruit of Jesus' death on the cross: “Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation, but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one (συναγωγή εἰς ἓν).” In the early Christian Lord's Supper prayers from *The Teaching*

Forever Together (verses 15b-17)

The prophetic elucidation of the word of the Lord (in the Greek text preceded by a connecting ὅτι in order to explain the content of the demonstrative pronoun τοῦτο) contains a sketch of the most important events in connection with the second coming.²⁷ Five aspects, following one upon another, are presented: the starting signal, the appearance of the Lord, the reunion of the dead and the living, their meeting with the Lord, and the eternal gathering that follows. In what follows, these five aspects will be discussed in more detail.

of the Twelve Apostles (9.4 and 10.5) we hear this eschatological expectation concerning the church: "Gather her from the four winds into your kingdom, which you prepared for her." The same trumpet which, according to Jesus Christ, will introduce the great assembling of the elect (Matt. 24:31) is mentioned by Paul as the signal for the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the living (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16-17; cf. *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 16.6). With these data, David Wenham supports his thesis that Paul is going back to the synoptic tradition: "Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse," in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, vol. 2, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 345-75.

²⁷ A separate point for attention is the relation between 1 Thess. 4:15b-17 and 1 Cor. 15:51-52, where there is talk of a transformation of people with an eye to the new world: the earthly body is changed into a spiritual body. Have we to do here with a specific development in the thinking of the apostle Paul, a shift from the resurrection to the transformation of the believers? Gerhard Löhr, however, "1 Thess 4,15-17. Das "Herrenwort", *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 71 (1980): 269-73, has emphasized the affinity between the two texts. According to him, they go back to a common tradition of oral preaching. John Gillman, "Signals of Transformation in 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985): 263-81, is of the opinion that the transformation theme in the letter to the Corinthians is implicitly present already in the letter to the Thessalonians. At the meeting with the Lord, the body of Christians, after all, must be conformed to his glorious body. How complex is the relationship between the letters to the Christians in Thessalonica on the one hand and in Corinth on the other? J. Delobel, "The Fate of the Dead according to 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15," in *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, ed. Raymond F. Collins (Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 340-47, points out that in both Greek cities Paul was confronted with the problem of members of the congregation who have passed away. The apostle's answer in both cases is based on the fact of Christ's resurrection and the expectation that all believers in the future will share in his triumph over death. The recent study of Schneider, *Vollendung des Auferstehens*, 299, seems to confirm this conclusion: according to him, both texts are determined by the situation of the different congregations in Thessalonica and in Corinth. When, on the subject of the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15 is the painting as a whole, we can see in 1 Thessalonians 4 a detail of it. While both texts thus deal with the events of the last day, in connection with the return of Jesus Christ and the coming of God's kingdom, there are considerable differences in the future perspective of the readers. In the Thessalonian church, there existed the fear that the dead would be left behind by the living. In Corinth some members of the congregation doubted the reality of the bodily resurrection. The only word parallel concerns the sound of the (last) trumpet (σάλπιγξ), a wind instrument that often appears in eschatological texts. We have to do here, not with a development in Paul himself, but with two different reactions of the apostle to what comes to the fore from two different churches. Only in connection with a particular occasion does Paul write about the coming of the Lord. From the Christian expectation of the future, he emphasizes to the Thessalonians *the great reunion* and to the Corinthians *the great change*.

The Starting Signal

First of all, a commanding signal (κέλευσμα) issues from two different voices. From what follows, it appears that both the voice of an archangel and a divine trumpet will be heard (cf. Rev. 1:10; 5:2). About the archangel, the New Testament says more only in Jude 9 in connection with which the name Michael is also mentioned (Rev. 12:7). In the book of Daniel and the Jewish literature, Michael is the special guardian angel of the people of Israel, who has earned himself a good name with his warlike spirit. About a divine trumpet, we read both in the Old Testament (Ex. 19:16; Ps. 47:5; Isa. 27:13; Joel 2:1, 15; Zeph. 1:14-16; Zech. 9:14) and in the New Testament (Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52; Rev. 8-9; 11:15). As God's appearance on Sinai was announced with a loud blast, so will it be with the appearance of the Lord. Introduced by the voice of an archangel and by an eschatological trumpet signal, the last day cannot escape the notice of a single believer. It is a great alarm. The living await their Lord and the sleepers are awakened (cf. John 5:25).²⁸

The Appearance of the Lord

There is continuity between the ascension and the second coming because both involve the same Lord. He who was taken up into heaven will also be expected to return from there (Acts 1:11). His glorious appearance from heaven makes us think of the theophanies of the Old Testament. When we read in verse 16 that the Lord himself will descend from heaven, we recall the prophecy of Micah: "Look! The LORD is coming from his dwelling-place; he comes down and treads the high places of the earth" (Mic. 1:3). We may also expect something similar of God's Son. He is the Lord himself (αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος). The end of the world begins with his triumphant descent from heaven. In verse 15, his coming in glory was described with one word as the παρουσία, the divine presence, of the Lord. The Thessalonians must expect the appearance of God's Son from heaven (2 Thess. 1:7; see also 1 Thess. 2:19).

The Reunion of the Dead and the Living

The believing people who will experience all of this are distinguished into two groups: dead and living (in that order). The first group consists of the dead in Christ (see 1 Thess. 1:9b-10). This expression is comparable with sleeping ones and refers to those who have died as Christians (1 Cor. 15:18; Rev. 14:13). Their connection with Christ has not been disrupted by the power of death

²⁸ By σάλπιγξ, the traditional shofar is meant: a wind instrument made from a ram's horn. Unlike the silver trumpets, this is a curved horn on which one blows with short and powerful breaths. For the people of Israel, the shofar was used especially for signals and alarms. The great future will not be introduced by a normal trumpet but by a supertrumpet!

because his divine power is superior. First (πρῶτον), they will arise from their grave; then (επειτα) will the living also go to meet their Lord.²⁹

The second group is given a twofold designation: “we living, those who remain” (ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι). Ordinarily, people conclude from this that the writers (as well as their readers, for that matter), assume that they themselves will be present at the second coming. Early in the twentieth century, however, Van Veldhuizen had already demonstrated convincingly that this is not the perspective of the text.³⁰ What the writers particularly want to express is the dejected feeling of those who are left behind, similar to the remnant of the people of Israel (Hag. 2:2). The survivors mourn for those whom they have lost. They do not cherish the hope that all who have been left behind will really experience the second coming but that there will be one day a reunion. At the coming of the Lord, the dead and the living will no longer be distinguished as such. Thanks to the resurrection, every difference falls away. Not without them, not before them, but at the same time as them (ἅμα σὺν αὐτοῖς) we who are living will go to meet the Lord.

The Meeting With the Lord

While the Lord descends from heaven, there is also an upward movement from the earth. All the believers together will be caught up on the clouds. The passive verbal form (ἀρπαγησόμεθα: we will be caught up) points to divine action. Elsewhere, the apostle Paul records about himself that, in a vision, he was caught up to the third heaven or to paradise (2 Cor. 12:2-4). Sometimes we see how people, in a miraculous way, can be transferred from one place to another; for example, Philip (Acts 8:39; cf. Rev. 12:5). Clouds form a divine means of transportation through the air (Dan. 7:13; Rev. 11:12). At one time, all believers, awakened to life or still living, will suddenly be lifted up by clouds and carried away to meet their Lord in the air.³¹

This fascinating meeting (ἀπάντησις) is described with a term from the Hellenistic world that was used for the reception of a dignitary. When a city was officially visited by a general or a monarch, a delegation of citizens went out to

²⁹ Verhoef, *De brieven aan de Tessalonicenzen*, 196-97, wants to link the words *in Christ* not with the dead but with the resurrection. This, however, would be without parallel in the New Testament. Whatever the case may be, it must be people from the circle of the Christian congregation.

³⁰ A. van Veldhuizen, “1 Thessal 4:15, 17,” *Theologische Studiën* 29 (1911): 101-6; see also Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, 65-67; and more recently Visser, *Paraklese in het perspectief van de parousie*, 130-31. In 1 Cor. 6:14 and 2 Cor. 4:14, Paul does not include himself with the living believers at the parousia when he writes that God will raise us like Jesus or with Jesus from the dead.

³¹ The Greek verb ἀρπάζειν means “to steal” (Matt. 12:29; John 10:12) but also “to take away, remove” (Matt. 13:19; John 6:15; 10:28-29; Acts 23:10; Jude 23). In the apocryphal book of Wisdom, it is used in connection with the premature death of a righteous person: “He lived in the midst of sinners and was taken away. He was snatched away, so that no wickedness would cloud his insight” (Wis. 4:10-11).

meet him and to conduct him on the last stage of his journey. A crowd of people were stirring at the entrance of the city itself. In this way, there was a royal triumphal procession.

Something similar happened at the entrance into Jerusalem when Jesus, as the king of Israel, was applauded and welcomed by various groups of pilgrims (John 12:13, 18; cf. Matt. 8:28; 25:1, 6; in this way, David was also received: 1 Sam. 18:6-7; 2 Sam. 19:16). Paul had a special reception as a prisoner en route to Rome. As soon as the prison transport arrived in Italy, brothers from the eternal city traveled to meet Paul in order to encourage him (Acts 28:15). In the Old Testament, we hear how Moses led the people of Israel from the camp to meet the LORD when he descended on Sinai with the sound of a trumpet, smoke, fire, and clouds (Ex. 19:10-20). Thus, at the coming of the Lord, there will be many people going out to meet him and to welcome him in a festal way into this world.³²

The Eternal Gathering

In Paul's writings, phrases such as "being with the Lord" or "living with the Lord" express the Christian hope (Rom. 6:8; 8:17; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23). These prophetically tinted expressions, too, are concluded with a hopeful reference: "Then we will always be with the Lord." This fits with the biblical given that the righteous can look forward to eternal fellowship with God, which one day will be their experience (Ps. 140:13; Rev. 21:3). In Judaism, many also had the special expectation of a continuing relationship with the Messiah (1 Enoch 39:6-8; 45:4; 62:14; 71:16). This will be the case when the Lord returns. The Thessalonians had learned to wait for God's Son from heaven (1 Thess. 1:9-10). Only on the day of his coming could they personally meet their Savior. Then they and all believers will always be in his company.

³² Michael R. Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's Use of ΑΙΑΝΘΗΣΙΣ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 4 (1994): 15-34, describes all kinds of Hellenistic texts about the reception of a dignitary. The differences with 1 Thessalonians are enlarged on because diverse elements in that passage are lacking, which were common with such a meeting (special clothing for the occasion, donations, sacrifices). Of course, there is no universal script for such occasions. The form was apparently determined by the meeting, dependent on the situation of the place. We can calmly propose that a variable reception pattern belonged to the cultural background of both the writers and the readers of this letter. The uniqueness of the coming of Jesus Christ is that the meeting will take place in the air and thus between heaven and earth. See also the reaction to Cosby from Robert H. Gundry, "A Brief Note on 'Hellenistic Formal Receptions and Paul's Use of ΑΙΑΝΘΗΣΙΣ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17,'" *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996): 39-41. It is worth mentioning the (legendary?) account that Josephus relates about the almost sacral reception in Jerusalem accorded to the Macedonian army under the leadership of Alexander the Great. The high priest had the city adorned with wreaths and the doors opened. Then people went to meet Alexander, the citizens clothed in white clothing and the priests in their official garb. To everyone's amazement, Alexander fell down in adoration. Together with the high priest, he entered Jerusalem in order to bring an offering to the temple of the God of Israel (*Jewish Antiquities* 11.325b-39).

The eternal gathering is not localized in the text. The question of whether people will find themselves in heaven or on the earth is not clearly answered. That is, however, not the main point of what the letter writers want to say. Their main point is the future expectation itself: There will be a definitive reunion of all believers with their Lord, Jesus Christ. Their relationship is unbreakable and inseparable. Their being together, then, is eternal.

Hidden in the preceding metaphor of a reception party going out to meet the prominent visitor and then escorting him back to the city is a hint about the place of this being together with Jesus Christ. Was he not on his way from heaven? Would he then return there? In his movement to the earth, the believers are taken along.³³ They were caught up to meet him in order to accompany him on the last stage of his journey to the earth. There they expected to be together with the Lord and so it will always be.³⁴

Shared Words (verse 18)

In a final admonition, the Thessalonians are summoned to comfort and encourage one another with the help of these words (cf. 5:11). The Greek verb παρακαλεῖν has two aspects of meaning, which both fit well in this context. *Comfort* was necessary on account of the problem we have discussed, namely, coping with the loss of the dead from Thessalonica. *Encouragement* was the main issue of the second part of the first letter, chapters 4-5.

A pronouncement of the Lord has been explained for the Thessalonians in prophetic terms and with the help of apocalyptic images. Although the loss that they mourn remains a sad reality, the situation is not hopeless when considered in the light of the return of Jesus Christ. This gives a new impulse to life. Every Christian, after all, will experience the moment that the dead will be reunited with the living and all believers will be reunited with their Lord. We live while we are looking forward to meet the Lord. Who then can still grieve without comfort? The best thing we can do as Christians is to await the great reunion with eager expectation.

³³ As Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44, puts it: "Moreover, it is more likely that the direction of the saints would conform to the direction of their *Lord* than the converse."

³⁴ In Greek, the word οὕτως can have both a modal ("in this way") and a temporal ("after that") meaning. The latter meaning is indicated by the fact that what precedes already indicated a specific order. We have to do with a series of three events: *first* the sleepers will rise; *then* the living, together with them, go to meet the Lord; *and only then* will we always be with the Lord (for this temporal meaning, see also Acts 20:11; 27:17; 1 Cor. 11:28; and D. Holwerda, *De Schrift opent een vergezicht* [Kampen: Kok, 1998], 160-63, for the construction of the Greek). The accent thus lies on the eternal togetherness of all believers with their Lord. This goal, however, will be reached only after two other things have taken place: first the resurrection of the dead and then the reunion of the dead and the living with Jesus Christ. This clarifies why, as verse 15 says, the living will not precede the sleepers.

A Rapture of Believers?

Some people expect on the basis of 1 Thessalonians 4 a sudden taking up of believers in the direction of heaven. This thought can be expanded in various ways; for example, in the form of dispensational speculations concerning “the rapture of the church”³⁵ and/or the idea of a catching up to heaven of believing people in order thereby to escape death.³⁶

Verses 15b-17, however, do not describe events that precede and are separate from the second coming. It is an apocalyptic scenario that depicts, in a prophetic manner, the reality of the things to come. With the reunion of all believers, the future of the Lord begins. His universal dominion, in which all believers will be allowed to share, will never end.

Three points should be noted here: First of all, verse 16 says that first the dead believers will rise. What follows is not a second resurrection but a movement involving those still living on earth. In the Greek, *πρῶτον* (first: close of verse 16) is followed by *ἔπειτα* (then: beginning of verse 17). That is to say, the text makes no distinction between believers and unbelievers but does between dead and living. About the unbelievers nothing is said. This concerns believing people only: those who died as Christians and those who remain on earth and expect their Lord. When Jesus Christ comes, the dead will first be brought back into earthly existence, and, from that moment on, they are in the same position as the living. Both groups will then together go to meet the Lord.³⁷

Second, in the background of this passage, as we have seen in the exegesis, lies the image of the enthusiastic reception of a heavenly dignitary. Jesus Christ, too, will be received as a monarch on the day of his visit to this world. When at his coming from heaven a spatial movement takes place from above to below, a delegation of believing people will go from below to above to meet him and accompany him. The traffic between heaven and earth will be going in not *one* but *two* directions! Then, the Lord will not disappear together with his own to heaven. Was the earth not his goal? That all believers will be taken up is thus not so much an evacuation for their own safety as a display of honor for the coming Savior, who has come.

Third, in verse 17, the eschatological meeting with the Lord is described in cosmic dimensions.³⁸ It is not the case that the church is separated from the

³⁵ E.g., John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Findlay: Dunham, 1955). Cf. Seth Turner, “The Interim, Earthly Messianic Kingdom in Paul,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25, no. 3 (2003): 323-42.

³⁶ See the publications of Joseph Plevnik on this theme, esp. “The Taking Up of the Faithful and the Resurrection of the Dead in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984): 274-83 and “1 Thessalonians: The Bringing in of the Lord or the Bringing in of the Faithful?,” *Biblica* 80 (1999): 537-46.

³⁷ Wilcke, *Das Problem eines messianischen Zwischenreichs bei Paulus*, 146.

³⁸ H. Koester, “From Paul’s Eschatology to the Apocalyptic Schemata of 2 Thessalonians,” in *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, ed. Raymond F. Collins (Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 441-58.

world, while history continues. Here sounds the *last* trumpet. Then world history ends and the future of Jesus Christ begins. Precisely at that point heaven and earth will touch each other: angels and believers will bring him homage (see 2 Thess. 1:7b-10). The close of this prophetic explanation is in fact open-ended,³⁹ pointing to the eternally enduring presence of the Lord in the midst of all believers.

The Great Reunion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the word of the Lord as mentioned in the very heart of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 refers to the eschatological discourse of Jesus Christ, where he had promised the worldwide gathering of all believers at his future coming. This pronouncement of the Lord himself, preceded by a confessional statement and followed by a prophetic explanation, supplies the essential consolation for the members of the Thessalonian congregation in their mourning for the dead. There is hope: in future, all believers (both the dead and the living) will be reunited around their Lord, Jesus Christ, to be with him forever.

³⁹ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 154-55.