

Testamentum Imperium

An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 2 – 2009

The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation: The Soteriology of 1 Thessalonians

Dr. Carl Judson Davis¹
Associate Professor of Greek
Bryan College, Dayton, Tennessee²

Introduction

- A. Evidence for an Irrevocable Call: "God" Used with "placed" in 1 Thess 5:9
 - B. Evidence Against an Irrevocable Call
 - C. Other Issues on Irrevocable Call
 - 1. The Explicit Promise 5:24 "God will do it"
 - 2. Paul's Assumptions in 1 Thessalonians of the Power of God's Acts
 - 3. Places in 1 Thessalonians Pointing to the Supernatural Nature of Salvation
 - 4. Things Paul Could Not Say of the Unregenerate
 - D. The Old Testament Background to Two of Paul's Ideas in 1 Thessalonians
 - E. In the Wider Pauline Context
- Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine Paul's soteriological implications and theological underpinnings in the book of 1 Thessalonians. It is the thesis of this paper that Paul's soteriological thought depends on a view that sees real faith as a gift from God and irrevocable. This real faith will always result in the real works of love for other Christians and steadfast hope in God because of Christ's merit alone. For Paul, these two evangelical works are proof of God's prior effective work producing faith.

¹ He earned a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies from the University of Sheffield. His dissertation is *The Name and Way of the Lord. Old Testament Themes, New Testament Christology* (JSNTSup 129; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). Greek fonts from www.BibleWorks.com.

² www.bryan.edu.

A. Evidence for an Irrevocable Call: "God" Used with "placed" in 1 Thess 5:9

Perhaps, the most important single statement in regard to soteriology in 1 Thessalonians is Paul's statement 1 Thess 5:9, ὅτι οὐκ ἔθετο ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ εἰς περιποίησιν σωτηρίας διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Translated, this is, "because God did not place us into wrath but into the acquisition of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."³ The important feature here is that Biblical Greek uses ὁ θεὸς with τίθημι in the sense of effectively doing an act. This is the usage in Gen 1:17 where God places the Sun and the Moon in the heavens for light, καὶ ἔθετο αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῷ στερεώματι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. This is an effective work, not a potential one. Similarly, the LORD God places the man in Eden (Gen 2:8), καὶ ἔθετο ἐκεῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον. He places man in Paradise (Gen 2:15), ἔθετο αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ. He places a sign on Cain (Gen 4:15), ἔθετο κύριος ὁ θεὸς σημεῖον τῷ Καὶν. Balaam says of God's purposes, that God places these things and none can fight against it (Num 24:23), ὅταν θῆ ταῦτα ὁ θεός. God places Solomon on the throne (1 Kgs 2:24), καὶ ἔθετό με ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον. He chooses to place his name on Jerusalem (1 Kgs 14:21 and many others), θέσθαι τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκεῖ.⁴ God will place Christ's enemies as a footstool for his feet (Ps 110:1[LXX 109:1]), ἕως ἂν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθρούς σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου. Outside the OT, God turns man's plans into dishonor (Jth 8:23), εἰς ἀτιμίαν θήσει αὐτὴν κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν. Odes 12:8/Pr Man 1:8 describes God as not appointing/placing repentance for the just, σὺ οὖν κύριε ὁ θεὸς τῶν δικαίων οὐκ ἔθου μετάνοιαν δικαίοις. Similar usage appears in Philo.⁵ The same is true

³ All translations of Greek and Hebrew in this paper are that of the author unless stated otherwise.

⁴ See similarly of God's effective placement in the following verses, (Ps 12:5[6. LXX 11:6]; 18:32[33, LXX 17:33]; 83:13(14) LXX 82:14]; Job 37:15; Amos 5:7; Hag 2:23; Jer 25:12; 28:14[LXX 35:14]; 41:13 [LXX 41:13]; 43:10[50:10]; Ezek 5:5; 37:1; Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Acts 13:47; 1 Cor 12:18; 12:28; 2 Cor 5:19).

⁵ Philo, *Opif.* 1:148, has God placing man as his viceroy. God places man in Eden (Philo, *Leg.* 1:43, 47, 53, 88; *Plant.* 1:32); God places the mind among the virtues (Philo, *Leg.* 1:89). God places enmity between the seed of the woman and seed of the serpent (Philo, *Leg.* 3:65); God places virtue as a boundary (Philo, *Leg.* 3:107). God places pain (Philo, *Leg.* 3:203; *Ebr.* 1:150); God places a sign on Cain (Philo, *Det.*, 1:177; *Fug.* 1:60); God made people to be a contradiction to their neighbors (Philo, *Conf.* 1:52); God places all things (Philo, *Conf.* 1:137; *Migr.* 1:182; *Mut.* 1:29); and many, many more.

for Josephus.⁶ See similarly the usage evidenced in the Pseudepigrapha.⁷ The usage of τίθημι and human subjects also implies effective purpose. Consider Gen 42:30, "Joseph placed us in jail." Jacob places Ephraim before Manasseh (Gen 48:20). Moses places the serpent on a pole (Num 21:8).

Now all of this sheds important light on 1 Thess 5:9, for the text there says that God placed us not for wrath but for attaining salvation. By analogy, the same way God placed the Sun in the heavens, so God placed us for salvation. The same way he placed man in Eden, he places us for acquiring salvation. Consider also that ἔθετο is an Aorist middle. In Paul's mind, it is a finished past act which God does intimately connected with the outcome of the action. These ideas fit well with the position that it is an effective act, but they fit ill if Paul only viewed the action as potential.

Consider too passages that use τίθημι and εἰς.⁸ Three of these passages are significant. Jer 25:12 says "I will place them into everlasting waste." This is not potential or simply possibility. It is what God will do. Similarly see, Acts 13:47 which says, "I have placed you for a light of the Gentiles" alluding to Isa 42:6 and 49:6. Similarly see 1 Tim 1:12, "having placed me in service" θέμενος εἰς διακονίαν. Therefore, 1 Thess 5:9, using the same language, is an effective act. Recall also that Paul says of the Jews who reject Christ and thus persecute Christ's church, "the wrath has come upon them in full" (2:19). What is true of that group has not been purposed for the Thessalonians.

All of these form the broad grammatical background for 1 Thess 5:9. Just as God placed all these things, so too God places Paul and his Thessalonian Christians for the acquisition of salvation. He did not place them for wrath. Greg Beale accurately reflects the theological implications of the grammar of this verse in the following note:

⁶ See God's work in an earthquake (Josephus, *A.J.* 6:27); God placed the Jews under their enemies (Josephus, *A.J.* 10:139); God made a decree against the Jewish nation (Josephus, *B.J.* 7:539).

⁷ God places thunderbolts (*Sib. Or.* 2:23); God places confusion (*Sib. Or.* 11:178); God will place the quick dying ones (*Sib. Or.* 14:10); God places Adam in Eden (*Gr. Apoc. Ezra* 2:11; *Apoc. Sedr.* 4:4; 16:6); God places the breezes (*3 Bar.* 2:1); God sets his throne in Paradise for judgment (*Apoc. Mos.* 8:1); God places Eve in Paradise (*Apoc. Mos.* 17:3); God places the habitation of the blessed ones on earth (*Hist. Rech.* 11:2; 12:7).

⁸ See 2 Sam 19:20; 2 Chr 33:7; Ps. 79:1[LXX 78:1]; Zeph 3:19; Hag 1:7; Jer 25:12; and Acts 13:47.

The word for *appoint* (*tithēmi*) expresses the notion of election of the disciples (Jn 15:16), of people appointed to have certain spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:28), of Paul as an appointed apostle (1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11), of Christ of whom God appointed heir of all things (Heb 1:2) and of people who reject Christ and stumble because that is what they are destined for (1 Pet 2:8). All these uses, including that here, refer to God's sovereign determination of someone for his own particular purposes. . . . Some commentators also argue that the election of believers here does not imply that others have been rejected, but Paul later explicitly contrasts God's election of people to "be saved . . . through belief in the truth" with unbelievers who "perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved" (2:10, 13). The ultimate difference in the contrasting responses to the truth lies in God's selection of some and not others. This is not politically correct theology that desires to democratize and to affirm various forms of universal inclusiveness (whether potential or actual), but it is Paul theology.⁹

Consider similarly Leon Morris:

His first point is that salvation proceeds from God's appointment. This is a point of some considerable importance to him, as we see from the prominence it has throughout his writings. We have already noticed his emphasis on the divine call (2:12, 4:7), and the way he speaks of Jesus as delivering us from the wrath (1:10). In one way or another this great truth is always coming out, for it is central to the gospel. All other religions, in the last analysis, present men with something that they must do if they would be saved. It is Christianity alone which tells us that all has been done. This is true of the manner of our salvation, for our sins were taken away through the blood of the cross. It is also true of the fact that we are saved at all. That is a matter of the divine appointment, of the fact that God calls us into this state. It is not to be understood as though we simply decided to belong to God. The word "appointed" is not as specific as words like "called," or "predestinated," but here it amounts to much the same. It rests our salvation on the divine initiative.¹⁰

Of this verse, Ernest Best writes, "Salvation is not some exterior and unrelated blessing to which they may possibly attain; they have been destined for it by God."¹¹ D. Michael Martin avers, "A fate 'appointed' by God is a reality, even if the full reception of that reality is not yet seen."¹² Charles A. Wanamaker argues, "In 1:4 Paul referred to the

⁹ G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (The IVP New Testament Commentary Series; Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 152-53 n. 5:9.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians. The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 160.

¹¹ Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 216.

¹² D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians* (The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 166-67.

election of his readers with the words τὴν ἐκλογὴν ὑμῶν ('your election'). Here he employs the verb τιθέναι to denote God's role in predestining people to wrath or salvation."¹³ Similarly, D. Edmond Hiebert states of this verse:

Our salvation proceeds from God's appointment. It is connected with the past act and deliberate purpose of God. The verb rendered "appointed" (*etheto*) means "to set, put, place" in connection with material things, and in connection with persons, "to place, to appoint" to a position of service or "to destine" them *unto* (*eis*) the realization of a definite goal. The middle voice indicates that God thus acted in his own interest, while the aorist tense denotes the action as an event of the past.¹⁴

An older commentator, John Gill (1697-1771) states similarly:

To destruction and ruin, the effect of wrath; though there are some that are vessels of wrath, fitted for destruction, of old ordained to condemnation, and who are reserved for the day of evil; but there are others who are equally children of wrath, as deserving of the wrath of God in themselves as others, who are not appointed to it; which is an instance of wonderful and distinguishing grace to them.¹⁵

Consider the following translations: God "has not destined" (ESV, NAU, RSV), "did not destine" (NET), "did not appoint" (NIV, NKJ), "hath not appointed" (KJV) us for wrath, "God chose to save us" (NLT), "God destined us not for his retribution" (NJB), "God has destined us not for wrath" (NRS). There is no room for uncertainty here. God placed it so that the Thessalonian Church would be saved.¹⁶

¹³ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 186-87.

¹⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles. A Call to Readiness* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 222.

¹⁵ John Gill, *The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible*, (1 Thess. 5:9), at www.studylight.org.

¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, revised and corrected (Mclean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, no date given), 6:788, writes, "If we would trace our salvation to the first cause, that is God's appointment. Those who live and die in darkness and ignorance, who sleep and are drunken as in the night, are, it is but too plain, *appointed to wrath*; but as for those who are of the day, if they watch and be sober, it is evident that they are *appointed to obtain salvation*. And the sureness and firmness of the divine appointment are the great support and encouragement of our hope. Were we to obtain salvation by our own merit or power, we could have but little or no hope of it; but seeing we are to obtain it by virtue of God's appointment, which we are sure cannot be shaken (*for his purpose, according to election, shall stand*), on this we build unshaken hope."

Charles H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), Sermon 41, writes after referring to 1 Thess. 5:9, "Methinks, my friends, that this overwhelming mass of Scripture testimony must stagger those who dare to laugh at this doctrine. What shall we say of those who have so often despised it, and denied its divinity; who have railed at its justice, and dared to defy God and call [*Footnote continued on next page ...*]

B. Evidence Against an Irrevocable Call

If one were making a case against an irrevocable call in 1 Thessalonians, then the best evidence would be in 1 Thess 3:3 where Paul sends Timothy so that no one would be moved from the faith as a result of Paul's afflictions. Moreover, 1 Thess 3:5 admits the idea that Paul's work among the Thessalonians may have been in vain. Consider the similar verse of Gal 4:11, "I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain" (ESV).

The question is, however, is Paul conceiving of this as one who had real faith and then that faith died, or is he admitting the idea that he could be wrong about the presence of real faith in the lives of the Thessalonians in the first place? The latter seems to be the case in my opinion since Paul finds encouragement that faith is really present (see 3:6 and 7). And notice also that Paul is again thanking God for the presence of this faith (3:9). So in Paul's mind the question was not of real faith that dies, but rather his judgment that real faith was there in the first place. If real faith is there, then it will always be there.¹⁷

him an Almighty tyrant, when they have heard of his having elected so many to eternal life? Canst thou, O rejector! cast it out of the Bible? Canst thou take the penknife of Jehudi and cut it out of the Word of God? Wouldst thou be like the woman at the feet of Solomon, and have the child rent in halves, that thou mightest have thy half? Is it not here in Scripture? And is it not thy duty to bow before it, and meekly acknowledge what thou understandest not—to receive it as the truth even though thou couldst not understand its meaning? I will not attempt to prove the justice of God in having thus elected some and left others. It is not for me to vindicate my Master. He will speak for himself."

¹⁷ Hiebert, *Thessalonians*, 142-43, writes, "Hendriksen points out that Paul's anxiety was fully consistent with his expressed conviction that the Thessalonians were God's elect (1:4) if we observe the true time sequence. Paul well remembered the enthusiastic response that the Thessalonians had given to the preaching of the gospel. But he felt that the missionaries had been driven out before it could be established whether it was a mere emotional reaction or genuine faith. With the persecution sweeping over them would they prove to be mere enthusiastic 'stony soil' hearers who would be offended and forsake the gospel when made to suffer for it? It was this uncertainty that created the burden of suspense for the missionaries and propelled the sending of Timothy. The glad report of Timothy that the Thessalonians had not failed under testing and were standing firm in their faith convinced Paul that their conversion was truly genuine and that they were verily God's elect."

William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary. Exposition of I and II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), 86, writes, "If we view the order of events in this light, justice is done both to the *fear* expressed here in 3:5 and the *conviction* expressed in 1:3-6. In no sense whatever is it true that 3:5 teaches that God's truly chosen ones can, after all, perish everlastingly."

John Chrysostom, *Hom. 1 Thess. 5*, (NPNF 1, 13:393), has this interesting comment, "For if He has chosen you to salvation, He does not deceive you, nor suffer you utterly to perish. But that he may not by these means lead them to sloth, and lest they think the whole to be of God should themselves sleep, see how he also demands coöperation from them, saying, 'And we have confidence in the Lord touching you, that ye both do and will do the things which we command you.' 'The Lord' indeed, he says, 'is faithful,' and having promised to save will certainly save; but as He promised. And how did He promise? If we be willing, and hear Him; not simply (hearing), nor like stocks and stones, being inactive."

Paul's fear reminds one of Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24-30). The tares can deceive even the careful observer at first but not forever. Eventually, the fruit proves the wheat; the lack of it proves the tares. However, we should remember that the wheat was always the wheat, and the tares were always the tares. Time simply shows the reality of what they were all along. The same is true of Paul's fear and the Thessalonians. He fears what he took for genuine faith might in fact be pseudo-faith all along. Similarly, Paul's fear reminds the reader of Jesus and the parable of the grounds (Mark 4:3-9). Three of the four look promising. The stony soil and thorny soil both show signs of life. But what makes the good ground good is that the farmer has prepared and protected it. It will bear fruit. Recall Jesus' statement in regard to this parable, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9), and Deut 29:4, "But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear" (ESV).

C. Other Issues on Irrevocable Call

1. The Explicit Promise 5:24 "God will do it"

Paul gives a promise in 1 Thess 5:24. He writes, "the one calling you (pl.) is faithful, he will do it." The context of this verse is the prayer immediately preceding in which Paul prays, "May the God of peace sanctify you fully, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept [by God] blameless in the parousia of Jesus Christ." Paul prays for full sanctification and a blameless standing at the coming of Jesus. He supports this with the statement, God promised it; God will do it. All of this suggests that Paul intends to convey to the Thessalonians that they have been elected by God for salvation. Moreover, God had not ordained them for the coming wrath.¹⁸ It is unclear how Paul could write these words, if, in the final analysis, he did not think them true of the Thessalonians. And if he thought them true, Paul viewed the Thessalonians' salvation and call by God as effective and therefore irrevocable.

¹⁸ See also Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* (WUNT, 2/37; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1990).

2. Paul's Assumptions in 1 Thessalonians of the Power of God's Acts

Paul's thought in 1 Thessalonians depends on his assumption that faith comes from a supernatural change wrought by God which is evidenced by works. That is, for Paul, when he saw things in the life of a person such as love for fellow Christians and devotion to God, Paul believed that the only way for that to be true was for God to have worked a supernatural work to enable that person to believe and act the way they did.¹⁹

Notice the following places which support this view. In 1:2-3, the actions of the Church at Thessalonica convinced Paul of the reality of their faith. Notice that Paul praises God for this work; he thanks God when he remembers *their* actions. If these actions were the result of human will or action, why would Paul praise God for it? Why would Paul praise God for the way the Church acts? In praising God for the faith of the Thessalonians, Paul is presupposing, as he does elsewhere in his works, that God is the author of faith and that the cause of these works is God (Eph 2:10; Phil 2:13). The reason he praises God is because ultimately those actions depend on God. See similarly 1 Thess 3:9.

Look at what Paul says in 1:4, "Knowing . . . your election." In other words, when Paul saw what was happening in Thessalonica, it assured him of two things. 1) Paul knows according to 1:4 that the brothers in Thessalonica are ones "having been loved by God" (see too 2 Thess. 2:13). Notice that the participle, ἡγαπημένοι, is a perfect passive participle. It is perfect in that it is a past action with lasting benefits. It is passive because "by God" is the explicit agent. The Thessalonians had been loved by God, and the result of that love in Paul's mind carried lasting benefits. 2) Paul, because of what he saw going on in the lives of the Thessalonians, knew their election, ἐκλογή (1 Thess 1:4; see similarly 2 Thess 2:14). The root of this word comes

¹⁹ See similarly, Beale, *Thessalonians*, 49, "Paul gives thanks for their faith and works because he is convinced of the genuineness of the Thessalonians' faith and wants to encourage them to reflect on the fact that what they once were as unbelievers, they no longer are in Christ. To encourage them further, Paul even more explicitly reassures them by stating that he discerns (or *knows*) in them the marks of God's elect people. Simply put, 1:4 gives another reason for the thanksgiving of 1:2 while 1:3 provides evidence leading to the conclusion that the readers are elect. The fact that Paul thanks God, not the readers, for their election shows that they contributed nothing to accomplishing their own salvation but that they were the object of an unconditional divine act (see Best 1972:70-71; 2 Thess 2:13, 15)."

from the idea "to pick out of", "to select out of." Paul knew that God had chosen these Christians and that ultimately he was the one causing these things to happen in their lives. He knew that being so loved and elected by God would result in the acquisition of the thing promised (2 Thess 2:14).²⁰

Consider further the phrase "beloved by God."²¹ This is an OT idea often used of God's elect people. Here Paul is using it of Christians.²² Notice too that Paul saw Jesus as delivering *ῥυόμενον* Christians from the coming wrath (1 Thess 1:10). This was for Paul something that Jesus was presently doing. Jesus was currently delivering Christians; it is not that "he might deliver", or that "possibly he was delivering." It was something he was doing right then in Paul's mind. Notice that God's word currently was working among the Thessalonian Church according to Paul (1 Thess 2:13). There, it was a work in "you who are believing" (*τοῖς πιστεύουσιν*).

Paul's main idea in 1 Thessalonians is to encourage the Church there in the midst of their and Paul's persecutions (2:1-2). It was God's purpose to prove by testing to the Thessalonians and the watching supernatural world, the hearts of the Thessalonians (2:4; Eph 3:9-11). The participle in 2:4 is in the present tense, *τῷ δοκιμάζοντι τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν*. God, by allowing the persecution of the Thessalonians, is proving by testing to all the world, and to the Thessalonians themselves that their faith is a supernatural and effective act of God.

3. Places in 1 Thessalonians Pointing to the Supernatural Nature of Salvation

In 1:1, Paul speaks of the Church as being "in God the father and Jesus Christ the Lord" (see similarly 2 Thess 1:1).²³ Notice Paul does not say that one day the Church would be in God and Jesus, but rather that at the very moment of writing the Church was in God and Jesus.

²⁰ Many English translations add "may" or "might" in the phrase *εἰς περιποίησιν δόξης τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* but there is no such wording in the Greek. In Greek, it is literally a call "into acquisition."

²¹ See Sir 45:1 describing Moses as a man, *ἠγαπημένον ὑπὸ θεοῦ*. Many verses in the OT speak of God or the LORD loving Israel (see Deut 7:8, 13; 10:15; 2 Sam 7:18 [LXX]; 2 Sam 12:24; 2 Chr 20:7 [LXX]; Ps 146:8 [145:8]; Prov 3:12; 15:9; Mal 1:2 in light of Romans 9; Isa 5:7; 63:9 [LXX]; Jer 31:3; John 21:7; Heb 12:6; Neh 13:26; see too Ode 10:7; Wis 16:26; Sir 4:14; 46:13.

²² See Deut 33:12; Jer 31:3; Hos 11:1; Mal 1:2; ; and in the NT 2 Thess 2:13, 16.

²³ Notice the possible OT background to being in God and in Christ: Zech 10:12.

This being "in God and Jesus" was in direct contrast to the persecution which pushed the Thessalonians to question God's care for them. Moreover, in 2 Thess 1:5, Paul can speak of the steadfastness of the Thessalonian Church as proof that God had counted them worthy of the kingdom of God. 1:5 says that it was God's power that caused the Gospel to go "into" you. God did it. God caused it. It was not the work of the Thessalonians. It was not the work of man. That Gospel, according to the same verse, came about with power, and the idea there is with God's power. The same is true of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of the Thessalonians. 1:6 suggests that the source of the way the Thessalonians acted was the character of Jesus who was the first to obey God in a perfect and wholehearted way. Notice 1:10 describes Paul, Silas, Timothy and the Thessalonians as being delivered from the coming wrath. They are not delivering themselves. Rather they are being delivered by Jesus. All these verses describe the supernatural nature of the salvation of the Thessalonian Church. And that supernatural work points to the belief that this work will be an effective work because God is the one doing it.

4. Things Paul Could Not Say of the Unregenerate

There are a number of things Paul could not say of an unregenerate person which he does say about the Thessalonian Christians. The Thessalonians became imitators of Paul and the Lord (1:6; 2:14). They turned to God from idols (1:9). Consider this last statement in the light of Rom. 3:9-20 or Acts 3:26; 11:38; 13:48; 14:27; 2 Tim. 2:25; and Jas 1:17. Consider that Jesus is delivering the Thessalonians from the wrath to come (1:10), and compare this to "wrath has already come upon them" (2:16). Paul believes that Christians can walk in a way worthy of God (2:12). Paul thanks God that they have received the word of God willingly (2:13). Paul expected God to strengthen the hearts of the Thessalonians so that they would be blameless (3:13). Paul thought that the Thessalonians could walk in a way pleasing to God (4:1). Paul thought that the Thessalonians would follow his instructions (1 Thess. 4:2; see particularly 2 Thess 3:4). In 4:5, by implication, they know God. Paul speaks of God calling the Church to holiness (4:7). They have received the Spirit (4:8). They are taught by God (4:9). They have real hope (4:13). Eventually they will be with the Lord (4:17; 5:10). They

are not in the darkness (5:4-5). They have been placed by God not for wrath but for the acquisition of salvation (5:9-10). They are the ones for whom Christ died (5:10). They are ones whom God will sanctify wholly (5:23). God is the one who will do it (5:24). They are brothers to Paul and Silas and Timothy (5:25, 26, 27). None of these things are true of the unredeemed.

D. The Old Testament Background to Two of Paul's Ideas in 1 Thessalonians

There are two places in 1 Thessalonians where Paul may be using the Old Testament as the background of his thought. One is 4:8 and the background of Ezek 36:22-36.²⁴ Ezekiel 36 is about God promising unconditionally and unilaterally to do a new work in Israel. This new work is God cleansing, God causing ones to walk in his way, God giving a new heart, and God giving a new spirit. The background of Ezekiel 36 is in the New Covenant promise of Jer 31:31-33. Ezekiel's presentation of that New Covenant is God granting a new spirit to those who are his. Paul is seeing this true of the Thessalonians.²⁵ Moreover, the connected passage in Ezekiel is Ezek 37:1-14. The picture is of God giving life to a dead army, the last phase of which is the granting of his spirit/breath (notice that both Ezek. 36:26 and 37:6, have the word רוּחַ, "spirit"). Paul is seeing God's putting of his Spirit into the redeemed as true of the Thessalonians. Therefore, Paul sees them as participating in the New Covenant promises of Ezekiel 36-37 and Jer. 31:31-33.

The second place in 1 Thess is 5:4-5 where Paul uses the imagery of light and darkness. He is alluding to the story of creation. In that story, notice that God creates the world "without form and void", a negative image used of the land after destruction in Jer 4:23. Notice that darkness is a negative idea throughout Scripture.²⁶ Notice the

²⁴ See similarly, Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "1-2 Thessalonians," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 878.

²⁵ So Weima, "Thessalonians," 878-80.

²⁶ See for example, Exod 10:15; 1 Sam 2:9; Ps 18:28[29]; 35:6; 69:23[24]; 107:14; 2 Cor 4:6; Eph 5:8; and 1 John 1:5.

deep/the abyss is negative.²⁷ That primordial world is dead, dark, under the waters of judgment, without order and without rule. Yet God first sends his Spirit to work, and then says, "Let there be light." The result is light, and, as opposed to the darkness, the light is good.²⁸

Paul, as does John in John 1:1-5, picks up on the spiritual symbolism of the Genesis account. He gives his conclusion that the Thessalonians are light not of the darkness. They are part of God's redemptive work. And ultimately, it is God's work, and the work of God's spirit. Just as God speaks light, and the result is that there is light, God has called the Thessalonians into salvation, a salvation separated by God from evil. Thus, Paul can call them of the light.

E. In the Wider Pauline Context

It is clear that Paul believed in the doctrines of sovereign grace from what he says elsewhere in his books. The most clear example is Rom 9:6-33. Paul's argument and the anticipated objections only work if Paul is advocating a view that salvation is the gift and work of God which does not depend on man's prior willingness to participate.²⁹ That being his clear theology in Romans 9, we would argue it is the background to his theology in 1 Thessalonians.

Conclusions

Therefore, Paul believed in the doctrines of sovereign grace and the idea that God's purpose would not be frustrated by the will of man. Paul did not take this to mean that he (Paul) needed to do nothing. Rather, Paul worked because he knew that God would work

²⁷ E.g., Gen 7:11; 8:2; Exod 15:5, 8; Ps 71:20; 77:16[17]; 106:9; Ezek 26:19; Amos 7:9; Jonah 2:5; Compare Gen 49:25; Deut 8:7; 33:13. Consider also the LXX translation of תהיה as ἔβυσσος.

²⁸ See similarly 2 Cor. 4:6. A. W. Pink, *Divine Inspiration of the Bible* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth, 1917), 8, writes, "The instrument that He employs is the written Word, the Word of God, and in every genuine conversion God says, 'Let there be light,' and there is light. 'For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (II Cor. 4:6). The parallel might be followed much further, but sufficient has been said to show that beneath the actual history of Genesis 1 may be discerned by the anointed eye the spiritual history of the believer's new creation, and as such it bears the stamp of its Divine Author and evidences the fact that the opening chapter of the Bible is no mere human compilation." Thomas Watson, *A Divine Cordial* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, no date given [originally published 1663]), 53, writes, "When God calls a man by His grace, he cannot but come. You may resist the minister's call, but you cannot the Spirit's call. The finger of the blessed Spirit can write upon a heart of stone, as once He wrote His laws upon tables of stone. God's words are creating words; when He said 'Let there be light, there was light'; and when He says, 'Let there be faith', it shall be so."

²⁹ Boettner, *Predestination*, 83-95.

and had worked first. 1 Thessalonians presents a view of soteriology consistent with the idea that God's call is irrevocable.