Paul's apocalyptic worldview and imminent expectation of the parousia are evident in his earliest letter, the first letter to the Thessalonians. In response to his proclamation of the gospel, the Thessalonians abandoned their traditional gods and turned to worship the living and true God. They also learned from Paul that Jesus is the Son of God and that God raised him from the dead and exalted him to heaven. Most importantly, they are to expect his coming from heaven, at which time he will rescue them from the wrath that is coming. The formulation “the wrath that is coming” suggests that this wrath is not merely a matter of the punishment of sinners in this life by illness and other misfortunes. Furthermore, it is not simply a matter of an individual judgment immediately after death followed by an afterlife designed to deprive or punish sinners. It suggests rather a public, cosmic event, the definitive divine visitation of the last days in which the righteous will be blessed and the wicked punished.¹

Apparently, some members of the newly founded community died after Paul’s initial visit, and he had not addressed the problem of what would happen to those who died before the coming of Christ.² To deal with that issue, he relates their deaths to the shared belief that Jesus died and was raised.³ If God had the power and graciousness to raise Jesus, they can be confident that God will bring with Jesus the believers who have fallen asleep when Jesus returns. As he says in 1 Cor 15:23, “Each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then those who belong to Christ at his coming.” Paul goes on to give more details about the coming of Jesus.⁴

In this further teaching, the problem in Thessalonica becomes clearer: “For this we say to you with a word of the Lord, that we who are living, who remain until the coming of the Lord, will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep.” It is likely that when Paul founded the community he

---

¹ Cf. Paul’s description of the “day of wrath” (ἡμέρα ὀργῆς) in Rom 2:5–11. See also Sib. Or. 3:545–72.
³ 1 Thess 4:14.
⁴ 1 Thess 4:15–17.
spoke about the imminent coming of the risen and exalted Jesus as the “Lord”\textsuperscript{5} and the benefits that the believers alive at that time would enjoy. The kind of tradition Paul probably taught the Thessalonians occurs in the Jewish apocalypse known as \textit{4 Ezra} in the interpretation of a vision of a man who rises from the sea, namely, the Messiah:

The one who brings the peril at that time will protect those who fall into peril, who have works and faith toward the Almighty. Understand therefore that those who are left are more blessed than those that have died.\textsuperscript{6}

Now Paul corrects that earlier teaching by explaining that those who are alive when the Lord comes will have no advantage over those who have died in Christ.

Then he gives a vivid account of the coming of the Lord, describing him as descending from heaven. A “command,” a “voice of an archangel,” and the sound of a trumpet accompany the descent.\textsuperscript{7} The command may be addressed to the dead, perhaps through the agency of the archangel’s voice, since the next event described is the rising of “the dead in Christ.”\textsuperscript{8} Then the resurrected dead and the living, those who are left, will be snatched up together in clouds to meet the Lord in the air.\textsuperscript{9} Since they will hardly remain in the atmosphere of the earth, in the air, the implication of the account is that they will accompany the Lord in his ascent back to heaven to be with him and one another forever. Thus heaven is the place where the new age occurs. Toward the end of the letter, Paul gives a summary of his eschatological teaching:

\begin{quote}
For God has not assigned us to wrath but to attaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us in order that, whether we wake or sleep, we might live together with him.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

In his letter to the Galatians, in the elaboration of the greeting, Paul says of Jesus Christ that he “gave himself for our sins so that he might deliver

\textsuperscript{5} In certain contexts in Paul’s letters, “Lord” is equivalent to “Son of Man” in the Synoptic Gospels. A likely hypothesis is that Paul did not use the term “Son of Man” because it is based on an Aramaic idiom that would be difficult for his Gentile audience to grasp and appreciate.

\textsuperscript{6} 2 Esd 13:23–24; translation from the New Revised Standard Version. See also Michael Edward Stone, \textit{Fourth Ezra} (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 392. For more such references, see Malherbe, \textit{Thessalonians}, 284.

\textsuperscript{7} On the imagery, its sources, and uses elsewhere, see Malherbe, \textit{Thessalonians}, 274.

\textsuperscript{8} This interpretation is supported by Phil 3:20–21, where it is Christ who has the power to transform (\textit{μετασχηματιζεῖν}) our lowly bodies to be similar in form to his glorious body by the power that enables him also to subject all things to himself.

\textsuperscript{9} 1 Thess 4:17.

\textsuperscript{10} 1 Thess 5:9–10.