

I Thessalonians:
An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary

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1 Thessalonians: An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary

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Lesson 1: The Birth and Growth of a Church

Introduction

More books of the New Testament were written by the Apostle Paul than any other New Testament author. He was certainly a man God used in special ways to minister to the church, but it is important to recognize that none of the New Testament writers wrote in a vacuum nor were their writings the product of simple dictation. While they wrote under the inspired guidance of the Holy Spirit, they wrote from the source of their relationship with the Lord Jesus and what God was doing or had done in their hearts and to their thinking, values, goals, sources of trust, and purposes for life. This is also the exact kind of change God wants to bring about in our lives and seeks to do so through these vibrant epistles of the New Testament.

Of course each book has its special purpose, subject matter, and theme as determined by the inspired direction of the Holy Spirit on the human author, but this was always in conjunction with the particular historical and personal circumstances and needs of the recipients. The human authors of Scripture wrote to real people with real problems in real situations in such a way that their writings are still very much applicable with tremendous relevance in our modern world. Man's problems in ancient times are still man's problems in modern times, and likewise, the solutions to man's problems then are the same today.

The Thessalonian epistles were written to the church at Thessalonica. It was a church under persecution, but also a church that had a dynamic testimony and that had grown through the persecution. Significantly, in every chapter of 1 Thessalonians, the Apostle sought to comfort and motivate with the truth of the Lord's sure return. As we study these books, therefore, we need to grapple with how the return of the Lord for the body of Christ should impact us and how it should not affect us, for as we will see, some had made a wrong application of the Lord's imminent return.

The City and the People of Thessalonica

Thessalonica was originally named Therma because of the many hot springs in the surrounding area, but in 315 B.C. it was renamed Thessalonica after the half sister of Alexander the Great. It later became known as Salonika and today it is called Thessaloniki. It is one of the few cities that still exists today from New Testament times and has a booming population of 300,000. The city was conquered by Rome in 168 B.C., and was made the capitol of the entire province of Macedonia. When Paul made his journey to the city, it boasted a population of 200,000 consisting mostly of Greeks though there was a large Roman population with a strong Jewish minority.

Its location also contributed to its importance. It was probably the greatest of the cities along the entire Egnatian Road, a great military highway which connected Rome with the East and which ran through Macedonia and parallel to the Aegean Sea. It had a sheltered harbor which was made into a naval station and equipped with docks by the Romans. Its midway position between the Adriatic and the Hellespont makes it even today a natural outlet for traffic from all points.

This commercial activity had two important results. First, it made Thessalonica a wealthy city. Well-to-do Romans settled there and Jewish merchants were attracted by the commercial advantages of the city (see Acts 17:4). However, the majority of people made their living by manual labor. Macedonian women, though, enjoyed a higher social position and greater privileges than elsewhere in the civilized world. Second, it brought Thessalonica a reputation for evil and licentiousness. The strange mixtures of a seaport city and the rites of the worship of the Cabiri cult caused the Apostle to make a special exhortation for holy living (1 Thess. 4:1-8).

Thessalonica was a free city and enjoyed the autonomy of self-government in all its internal affairs. Although it was the residence of the provincial governor, he exercised no civil authority because the city was ruled by politarchs (cf. Luke's accurate reporting in Acts 16:6). This political privilege was jealously guarded by the people who were extremely sensitive about anything that might result in imperial disfavor. It was because of this that the charge framed against Paul and his companions was one of treason and this was the most dangerous charge that could have been leveled against them in a city like Thessalonica (Acts 17:7).

Today, “it is an important industrial and commercial city in modern Greece and is second to Athens in population. It served as a important Allied base during World War I. In World War II it was captured by the German army, and the Jewish population of about 60,000 persons was deported and exterminated.”¹

The Gospel Comes to Macedonia

From Antioch to Philippi to Thessalonica (Acts 15:36–17:15)

In the book of Acts, Dr. Luke gives the historical background which describe the events that led to the formation of the church in the city of Thessalonica. The missionary team of Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke went to Thessalonica in response to God’s leading and their deep sensitivity to the will of God. In Antioch, Paul chose Silas as his partner for this journey after separating from Barnabas over the problem with John Mark. Shortly after this, when in Lystra, Paul enlisted Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). During their second missionary journey, Paul and Silas revisited and strengthened those churches in the faith they had previously founded during their first missionary work. Having done this, it was their intention to go through the Phrygian and Galatian regions, but being forbidden to do so, they then attempted to carry the Word to Bithinia, but again the Lord had other plans. Consequently, they passed by the town of Mysia and went down to Troas. There in a vision Paul received the call to carry the gospel into Macedonia, one of the regions of Europe (Acts 17:6-10). Immediately Paul, Silas, Timothy, and now also Luke who had joined them at Troas, firmly concluded God had called them to carry the message of the Savior to Macedonia.

To preach and teach the Word to a dying and lost world is never really an issue in the will of God, but exactly when and where (time and place) is an issue in keeping with God’s preparation of the soil of human hearts. As Christians, we are all called to be a part of promoting the spread of the glorious truths of the Word, but where, when, and how are important matters that need to be discerned in the will of God for each individual believer. Thus, the birth of the church at Thessalonica was the result of both God’s leading and the attentive ears of Paul and his missionary team.

Having arrived at Somothrace in Macedonia, the missionary team moved on through Neopolis to Philippi, a leading city of Macedonia and a Roman colony. There Lydia, whose heart God had opened for the gospel, and her household were led to the Christ with a church being established in her home. After some days of ministry there, Paul and Silas were arrested on false charges, beaten, and thrown into jail. Following a miraculous deliverance by the Lord, the Philippian jailer and his household were also led to the Savior (Acts 16:19-40).

These circumstances forced the missionaries to leave Philippi. So after encouraging the new believers, the missionary team left the city (though Luke may have stayed behind temporarily) and journeyed on through Amphipolis and Appollonia to the important city of Thessalonica. It appears from Luke’s account that they simply passed by these two towns, but why? Did they not need the gospel also? Certainly, but Paul’s strategy took him to the larger cities and for a very good reason. It was not because they had no burden for these people, but because apparently it was Paul’s strategy to minister in the larger cities with a view to having those churches reach out into the smaller communities as people naturally moved in and out of the larger and busier cities (see 1 Thess. 1:7-8). Thessalonica even contained a synagogue because the city had attracted Jewish merchants and Paul found this a natural place to begin. It was a city of commerce with a population of 200,000. This meant a lot of traffic with people moving in and out of the city from the surrounding regions. Once people were led to Christ and trained, these new converts could take the gospel to other regions (cf. 1:8-9) and vastly multiply Paul’s ministry. Further, Paul could more easily practice his trade and support himself in a city like Thessalonica (cf. Acts 18:3; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8).

Though Paul was commissioned to carry the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Eph. 3:1-12), it was his policy to begin his ministry among the Jews, usually at the local synagogue where the Old Testament was known and revered.

Paul could get a sympathetic hearing in the synagogue, at least until persecution began. Furthermore, there were always many Gentile “God-fearers” in the synagogues, and through them Paul could began a witness to the pagan Gentiles. Add to this Paul’s great burden for the Jews (Romans 9:1-3 and 10:1), and the historical principle of “To the Jew first” (Rom. 1:16), and you can see why Paul and his associates began their work in the synagogue.²

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 10.

² Wiersbe, p. 11.

According to Luke, the converts at Thessalonica included Jews and a great multitude of devout Greeks who were attracted by the monotheism and morality of Judaism and who had attached themselves to the synagogue (Acts 17:4). Some of the believers were of the upper classes, but most were apparently of the working class since Paul refused to accept any financial aid while he was there. This response drew people away from the Jewish community which angered the Jews and caused them to resort to violence and mob activity. They attacked the home of Jason, Paul's host, and dragged him before the rulers where he was charged with harboring traitors to Caesar. This charge of treason is the first recorded after the trial of Jesus before Pilate and could have been an outgrowth of the eschatological preaching of Paul at Thessalonica as seen in these epistles. After Jason put up a bond, forfeitable if there was further trouble, Paul and his cohorts were freed and journeyed on to Berea. They were soon driven from Berea also by Jews who pursued them from Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-14). From there they went to Athens where Timothy joined the team, but he was quickly sent back to the young church at Thessalonica to check on their condition.

It is really not so surprising that, due to the glorious nature of the message of the gospel, people came to Christ and churches were founded across the country. The amazing thing, considering the pagan atmosphere in which the new converts were immersed, is that they grew, reached out, and endured. With the exception of the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles who attended the synagogue, the greater body of converts came to Christ from outright paganism. They were surrounded with a culture of heathenism and gross immorality. This led to enormous temptation to return to their old ways and significant persecution if they refused to recant their faith in Christ.

The Christian missionaries were carrying the war into the enemies' country. After every new conquest, annoying guerrilla warfare was set up behind them. Heathenism and immorality, in a thousand forms, were always pressing in upon the territory that had been won. The early converts were often made of very feeble clay. They had only begun to understand the principles of the Christian life. When Paul had left them, when they were thrown upon their own resources, would they not simply drift back to their old ways?

This question must always have filled Paul with anxiety. In facing it he needed all his faith in the power of God. Anxiety must have been particularly intense when as so often, Paul was driven out of a new church before his work in it was done. With what eagerness, after such a forcible departure, must Paul have awaited the first news of the youthful church!

In First Thessalonians we discover just how Paul felt when the first news arrived. First Thessalonians is the only one of the Pauline epistles which was written at just such a time. Hence its peculiar interest.³

As with Philippi, the Apostle had been driven out of Thessalonica by persecution from the Jews and from there he had gone on to Berea. But even in Berea the hatred of the Jews had pursued him, so the Berean believers escorted the Apostle to Athens. It appears that since Silas and Timothy had not been as conspicuous as Paul, they were able to remain at Berea (Acts 17:11-15). As Bruce points out:

He had been virtually expelled as a trouble maker from one Macedonian city after another. Had he and his companions been mistaken when they crossed the sea from Asia Minor to Macedonia under a conviction of divine guidance? Had the Macedonian mission proved abortive? In each Macedonian city visited they had established a community of believers. But the missionaries had been forced to leave these young converts abruptly, quite inadequately equipped with the instruction and encouragement necessary to enable them to stand firm in the face of determined opposition. Would their immature faith prove equal to the challenge? It did, outstandingly so, but this could not have been foreseen. The first gospel campaign in Macedonia, in the light of the sequel, can be recognized as an illustrious success, but at the time when Paul was compelled to leave the province it must have been felt as a heartbreaking failure.⁴

³ J. Gresham Machen, *The New Testament, An Introduction to Its Literature and History*, Edited by W. John Cook, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1976, p. 115.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. xxvi.

From Thessalonica to Athens to Corinth (Acts 17:16–18:17)

Paul instructed the returning Bereans to have Silas and Timothy join him immediately at Athens (see Acts 17:15 and 1 Thess 3:1). Paul then sent Timothy back to Macedonia for the purpose of strengthening and encouraging the Thessalonian believers and to bring back a report about their faith and spiritual condition. Silas was probably sent on a similar mission to Philippi.

While these two co-workers were gone, Paul, having experienced a relatively fruitless ministry at Athens (Acts 17:16-34), left Athens and went to the city of Corinth. There he enjoyed a spiritually prosperous ministry for a year and a half.

If the stay in Athens was about two months, his arrival in Corinth must have been in December, A.D. 49, or January, A.D. 50. If we allow time for Timothy's round trip to Thessalonica on foot and also time for his ministry in Thessalonica, then he and Silas probably returned to Paul from Macedonia in the spring of A.D. 50 (Acts 18:5; 1 Thess 3:6, 7). Timothy's report on Thessalonica was so encouraging that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians almost immediately.⁵

The Occasion for the Epistle

From Timothy's report and perhaps also as the result of a letter brought to him from the Thessalonian church, Paul learned about the situation and the needs of the believers at Thessalonica. He learned first of all about the spiritual stamina of the Thessalonian converts in the face of fierce persecution and opposition (1:6; 3:6-10). But he also learned the disturbing news of how the Jews had slandered him accusing him of teaching error and of false motives. The nature of their slander has been accurately captured by Frame:

Among other things, the Jews had asserted (1 Thess. 2:1-12) that in general Paul's religious appeal arose in error, meaning that his gospel was not a divine reality but a human delusion; that it arose in impurity, hinting that the enthusiastic gospel of the Spirit led him into immorality; and that it was influenced by sinister motives, implying that Paul, like the pagan itinerant impostors of religious or philosophical cults ... was working solely for his own selfish advantage. Furthermore and specifically the Jews had alleged that Paul, when he was in Thessalonica, had fallen into cajoling address, had indulged in false pretenses to cover his greed, and had demanded honour from the converts, as was his wont, using his position as an apostle of Christ to tax his credulous hearers. Finally, in proof of their assertions, they pointed to the unquestioned fact that Paul had not returned, the inference being that he did not care for his converts and that he had no intention of returning. The fact that Paul found it expedient to devote three chapters of his first letter to a defense against these attacks is evidence suspicion of some of the converts was aroused and that the danger of their being beguiled away from the faith was imminent.⁶

There was also the report about the confusion that existed on the part of some regarding the return of the Lord and the Day of the Lord. Some wondered how the return of the Lord might affect one or more of the converts who had since died (4:13-18). Due to the intensity of the persecutions, it appears some thought that "the Day of the Lord" had arrived so this issue also had to be addressed (5:1-15). Finally, Paul learned of certain weaknesses in the church that needed to be dealt with. They were under pressure to return to their former lifestyles (3:2-3; 4:1-10), some members were not working in view of the imminency of the return of the Lord (4:11-12; 2 Thess. 3:6ff.), some were not showing the respect that was needed for their leaders, and there was confusion in regard to the public gatherings together (5:19-21).

The Purpose and Theme of the Epistle

The purpose and burden of the Apostle in writing to the Thessalonians can be summarized as follows:

⁵ Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

⁶ James Everett Frame, *The International Critical Commentary, a Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1912, 1960, p. 10.

1. To express his thankfulness for what God was doing in the lives of the Thessalonians (1:2-3),
2. To defend himself against a campaign to slander his ministry (2:1-12),
3. To encourage them to stand fast against persecution and pressure to revert to their former pagan life-styles (3:2-3; 4:1-12),
4. To answer a doctrinal question pertaining to the fate of Christians who had died (4:1-13),
5. To answer questions regarding the “Day of the Lord” (5:1-11),
6. And to deal with certain problems that had developed in their corporate life as a church (5:12-13; 19-20).

In the midst of all of this, two major themes arise in the study and reading of 1 and 2 Thessalonians:

The first theme is the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a subject found at the close of every chapter. Concerning Christ’s return there is a two-fold emphasis of both a confident expectation along with the call to live in readiness in the light of His imminent coming.

The second theme revolves around the ministry of the local church and its life in the world. In this the Apostle balances the prophetic with the practical. As in other places, the doctrine of the return of Christ for the church is a truth that should transform how we live as individuals and as a corporate body of God’s people.

The Length of Paul’s Ministry at Thessalonica

Some debate has existed over just how long Paul ministered at Thessalonica. Acts 17:2 tells us that “according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures.” Some have understood from this that the Apostle was only in Thessalonica for three weeks. Others conclude that “the three weeks” simply means that he preached in the synagogue for only three weeks but after that he evidently moved his ministry to another location. The evidence may suggest that he was there for a little more than three weeks, but how much longer we simply do not know other than it was a relatively short time. From Philippians 4:16 we know that the Philippians may have sent more than one gift to the Apostle while he was in Thessalonica, but this does not necessarily assume a long period since the journey from Philippi to Thessalonica required only about 5 or 6 days, a period that could well fit within a three or four week period. Further, a careful study of Philippians 4:16 does not necessarily indicate more than one gift from Philippi. Ryrie writes:

A careful study of Philippians 4:16 would indicate that it probably does not mean that Paul received several gifts from the Philippians while at Thessalonica. This verse may be translated, “Both (when I was) in Thessalonica and more than once (when I was in other places) you sent ... (cf. Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, p. 17).⁷

We also know that he continued to support himself with his trade as a tent maker (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:6-15), but even this does not necessarily prove a stay longer than three weeks. As Wiersbe points out, “If Paul were there only three weeks, he certainly taught the new Christians a great deal of basic Bible doctrine. As we study these two letters, we will discover that almost every major doctrine of the Christian faith is mentioned.”⁸ I personally believe it was not much longer than three weeks, perhaps six at the most, but regardless, the amount of doctrine taught in this short span of time clearly demonstrates the priority the Apostle placed on the doctrines of the Word.

Lessons We Can Learn From This Background Information

While the exposition of this epistle will teach us a great deal about the ministry and strategy of the Apostle Paul, a missionary extraordinaire, the preceding historical background can teach us a number of very practical truths if we only have ears to hear.

(1) God uses ordinary people. In Revelation 14:6 we are told that in the future, along with His other witnesses, God will use an angel flying in mid-heaven who will proclaim an eternal gospel, but generally God does not send

⁷ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1959, p. 12.

⁸ Wiersbe, pp. 12-13.

angels to preach the gospel. Rather He *uses people*, ordinary people. God has chosen men and women as His ambassadors for Christ, mere earthen vessels to manifest the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves (2 Cor. 4:6-7; 5:17).

(2) God takes ordinary people from all walks of life, but with one consistent ingredient. He uses those who are committed to the Lord, and sensitive to His leading and burden for the world; men and women available to become living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1f.) and willing to go wherever God leads to reach others with the message of Christ. So, to reach the Thessalonians, He sent a converted and transformed Jew with his fellow workers to spread the gospel in Macedonia.

(3) The Word of God is central in Paul's methodology. The key to Paul's strategy and the ability of this church to endure the pressures they faced from the religious persecution of the Jews and the paganism of that day was their knowledge of the Word. In a little over three weeks he taught this congregation a great deal of Bible doctrine. He did not lean on the world's gimmicks or strategies to reach people and establish a growing, thriving, and enduring ministry. In Acts 17:2 we are told that according to Paul's custom, he reasoned with them from the Scriptures. Why? Because the Apostle and his missionary team understood a vital truth. It is the gospel and the Word of God as a whole that is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16) ministered not by man's power or wisdom or human ingenuity, but ministered by the power of the Spirit of God. It was so then and it is so today (cf. Acts 1:8; Zech. 4:6; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 1 Thess. 1:5 and 2:13).

(4) Though the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, Satan and the world, especially the religious world, stand vehemently opposed to the message of Christ. While Satan and his world system will often gladly accept and integrate other religions into the world's system, the world stands ready to oppose and persecute Christians who refuse to compromise and who stand firm in their faith. Paul warned these believers of this very truth as did the Lord (John 15:18-20; 1 Thess. 2:17; 3:3).

(5) Though Satan may hinder and even cause believers to be cast into prison, the Word is not bound and God is able to direct His saints to fulfill His sovereign purposes for the greater progress of the gospel. Truly, He takes the wrath of man and uses it to praise Him (Ps. 76:10). The success of the gospel and the enduring faith of the Thessalonians illustrate the truth of Philippians 1:12ff.; 1 Thessalonians 3:10f. and 2 Timothy 2:8-9.

Date and Place of Writing

Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written from Corinth during the Apostle's eighteen-month stay in that city (cf. Acts 18:1-11). The first epistle was written during the earlier part of that period just after Timothy had returned from Thessalonica with news of the progress of the church, and the second letter was dispatched just a few weeks later (or at the most a few months). Any date assigned will have to be approximate, though probably ... AD 51-52.

Reasons for Studying 1 and 2 Thessalonians

1. First and fundamentally, as a part of the Word of God and as letters written to the church, the body of Christ, they deserve our careful study for the purpose of knowing and applying God's truth to life.
2. These epistles give us insight into the heart and motivations of the Apostle Paul and so also to the kind of heart we all need in caring for others in ministry or pastoral care.
3. They show us how Paul worked with and helped young converts. They give insight into the realm of what we can call 'pediatrics.'
4. They picture a local church in its most elementary New Testament form.
5. They each present special insight into the Lord's return and how that is to impact our lives in terms of greater spirituality. In other words, both epistles show the practical ramifications of prophecy or things to come. In that regard, note the following facts about 1 Thessalonians: Every chapter ends with a reference to the coming of the Lord Jesus, and each reference relates the doctrine of His coming to some aspect of practical Christian living. Here is a suggested summary:

1:10—salvation and assurance

2:19-20—soul-winning and service

3:12-13—stability in Christian living

4:13-18—strength for sorrow in the face of death
 5:23-24—sanctification of life.

Outline Analysis

The outline that follows is derived from 1:3 and three very significant phrases as stressed in the Greek text, “the work of faith,” “the labor of love,” and “the endurance of hope.”⁹ This can be summarized as: **The past**: the work of faith (1:1–3:13); **The present**: the labor of love (4:1-4:12); **The prospective**: the endurance of hope (4:13–5:28). While this exact outline will not be followed in the exposition, it is offered as an alternative overview of the book.

- I. The past: the work of faith (1:1–3:13)
 - A. The commendation of the Thessalonians (1:1-10)
 1. The evaluation of Paul (1:1-4)
 2. The evidence of life (1:5-7)
 3. The explanation of the evidence (1:8-10)
 - B. The conduct of the Apostle and his co-workers (2:1-12)
 1. Their witness (2:1-2)
 2. Their word (2:3-7a)
 3. Their walk (2:7b-12)
 - C. The conduct of the Thessalonians (2:13-16)
 1. Their reception of the word (2:13)
 2. Their response to the word (2:14)
 3. The rejection of the word (2:15-16)
 - D. The concern of the Apostle (2:17-20)
 1. His heart for the Thessalonians (2:17)
 2. His hindrance by Satan (2:18)
 3. His hope in the Thessalonians (2:19-20)
 - E. The confirmation of the Thessalonians (3:1-10)
 1. The sending of Timothy (3:1-5)
 2. The report of Timothy (3:6-10)
 - F. The concluding prayer (3:11-13)
 1. The prayer that he might return to the Thessalonians (3:11)
 2. The prayer that the Thessalonians might grow in love (3:12)
 3. The prayer that their hearts might be established in holiness (3:13)
- II. The present: the labor of love (4:1-12)
 - A. Their love for God expressed in sanctified living (4:1-8)
 - B. Their love for the brethren, an expression of being God taught (4:9-10)
 - C. Their love for the lost expressed in godly living (4:11-12)
- III. The prospective: the endurance of hope (4:13–5:28)
 - A. Concerning the day of Christ: the comfort of His coming (4:13-18)
 1. The resurrection of sleeping saints (4:13-16)
 2. The rapture of living saints (4:17-18)
 - B. Concerning the day of the Lord (5:1-11)
 1. The coming of the day of the Lord (5:1-5)
 2. The conduct of Christians (5:6-10)
 3. The conclusion (5:11)
 - C. Concerning deportment in the congregation (5:12-28)
 1. The concluding prescription (5:12-22)
 2. The concluding petition (5:23-24)
 3. The concluding postscript (5:25-28)

⁹ This outline is primarily that of Dr. Stanley Toussaint taken from class notes used at Dallas Theological Seminary with some variations.

Lesson 2: The Salutation (1 Thess. 1:1)

1:1 *From Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to you!*

Most people tend to read rapidly over these epistolary salutations in an attempt to get on to the so-called real ‘meat’ of the epistle, but to hurry past these warm greetings is to miss some important and very practical truth. They were important to Paul, to his readers, and as we reflect on them and seek to apply God’s Word to our lives, we find they are important to us. When my wife and I were dating, we were never really separated by any great distance and so we never wrote each other letters, but being in an all male military school, I regularly observed how eager the guys were to get letters from their sweethearts. There was a period while in school that I was very much smitten by a girl I was dating, and being some ninety miles away, we communicated a lot by letter. I would regularly go to the post office in anticipation of one of her perfumed letters. After sniffing the envelope, which was a dead give away as to its source, I would immediately open the letter and begin reading, but you know, I always paid particular attention to just how she would begin and close her letters. As our relationship developed, this told me a lot about how she felt about me—or at least I thought it did. Would she begin with “Dear Hampton” or “Hi Hamp” or “My dearest ...”? And how would she close it? With simply “love” followed by her name or with, “I love you and miss you”?

The greetings and closures of a letter can just be formality, but they can also demonstrate love and concern. These epistolary greetings and the nature of the letter which followed were clearly the product of Paul’s concern and care for his readers as it pertained to the particular circumstances of their lives. So it is important for us to see why and what Paul was doing in these verses to get a feel for his concern and the desires he had for them because this has personal application to us. They express God’s desire, concern, and care for us today.

The Human Author—Paul

In ancient times names carried more significance than they do today by way of their meaning and use. They were chosen and often used according to their meaning, especially among the Jews. “Paul” was the Apostle’s Gentile or Roman name which means “little.” Interestingly, though His Hebrew name was Saul (“asked for,” Acts 13:9), Paul is the name always used by the Apostle himself. Contrary to others like Simon Peter (Matt. 10:2), Saul and Paul are never found together. There has been some speculation as to how he came to have two different names.

In Paul’s case, the double name may be explained in one of four ways: (a) he had both from childhood; (b) being short of stature, 2 Cor. 10:10, the contrast with his O.T. namesake, I Sam. 9:2, suggested the second name; (c) he took it from Segius Paulus, the Roman proconsul whom he met at Paphos, Acts 13:4-12; it is in this context that the name Paul first occurs; (d) in self-deprecation, cp. I Cor. 15:9, and Eph. 3:9, *et al.* Of these (a) is, perhaps, to be preferred.¹

Regardless of how he came by the name Paul, in the divine sovereignty of things, it certainly reflected both his call and ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Eph. 3:1-12) and his grace perspective of himself as seen in his statements in 1 Corinthians 15:9-11 and in 1 Timothy 1:12-17:

1 Cor. 15:9-11. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. 11 Whether then *it was* I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

1 Tim. 1:12-17. I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service; 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; 14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ

¹ C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians With Notes Exegetical and Expository*, Pickering and Inglis, London, 1914, p. 1.

Jesus. 15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

May I suggest that Paul's names (both Paul and Saul) reflect the truth of our inadequacy and so our need to go to the great and all sufficient one, the Lord Jesus Christ, through the privilege of prayer (1 Cor. 15:9-11).

Paul's Associates—Silvanus and Timothy

His companions are identified as Silvanus and Timothy. "Silvanus" is the Silas of Acts. Silas was probably his Aramaic name and Silvanus his Roman or Gentile name. He was a Jew (Acts 16:20), a chief man among the brethren at Jerusalem (Acts 15:22), a prophet (v. 32), and a companion of Paul on his second missionary journey (v. 40). Later, Silvanus became a companion of Peter as well (1 Pet. 5:12).

"Timothy" was a younger man, the son of a Jewish Christian mother and a Gentile father (Acts 16:1; 2 Tim. 1:5). It appears Paul had led Timothy to Christ (1 Tim. 1:2) though the statement here could refer to Paul's fatherly mentoring of his young cohort.

More importantly, Paul willingly acknowledged his fellow laborers. He wanted to build the confidence of others in these two men and what the Lord was doing in and through them. There was no jealousy, nor fear of competition. They were all just fellow laborers and instruments of the Lord.

We might also note that in neither 1 or 2 Thessalonians does Paul identify himself as "an apostle" or "a servant" of Jesus Christ as in other places. Perhaps this was because he had just recently been with these believers and no one had called his official position in question as had been done in Corinth.

In summary, what can we learn from the fact Paul included his partners in his address?

(1) He was considerate of others and acknowledged their part in his ministry. He was not trying to hog the limelight or get all the attention for himself.

(2) He was a team player. It shows his viewpoint about ministry—he was not a one man team. He needed them and wanted these believers to know of their concern and love as well.

(3) It teaches us something of his methodology: He was always training others and involving them in ministry. One of my teachers in seminary, Howard Hendricks, used to say, "Gentlemen, never do anything by yourself if you can help it. Take someone along and let them learn from you and with you."

The Recipients—The Church of the Thessalonians

As usual, there are two designations or spheres by which Paul refers to his recipients: one is local and one is spiritual. Why? Evidently it was because, as Christians, we live in two spheres and Paul wanted us to learn to relate to both and see how each sphere affects the other.

The Local Description

"Unto the church (sg) of the Thessalonians (pl)." Normally, the Apostle wrote something like "unto the church which is at ..." So why the difference? "Of the Thessalonians" is a little more personal and seems to be more directed toward the individuals of the congregation. "Of the Thessalonians" means the church consisting of Thessalonians. This change seems to lay stress on the individual concern of the Apostle for each member. Why? Because the members in Thessalonica were under severe persecution and testing and Paul's heart went out to each member in their suffering.

Further, there is an interesting observation here which stresses the point made in the introductory remarks about writing to real people in real life situations. To note this, compare 1:1 with 1 Corinthians 1:2. Do you see any difference? Here Paul wrote, "to the church of the Thessalonians *in God*," but in 1 Corinthians he wrote, "to the church *of God* which is at Corinth." Why the difference? What was going on and how does this apply to us? The church at Thessalonica was undergoing persecution while the church at Corinth was troubled by party factions with some member claiming allegiance to certain personalities (see 1 Cor. 3:3f.) as though these personalities owned the church

when it really, of course, belonged to God, not men. The Thessalonians needed to be reminded of their sphere of protection and provision which was *in God*.

The word “church” is *ekklēsia* and means “a company called out.” While it has other non-theological uses in the New Testament in a few places, its primary use in the epistles is theological. As such, it may be used of (1) the universal church as the entire body of Christ or (2) of any local assembly of believers. Either way, it stresses we are a people called out of the world (an elect assembly) unto the Lord to represent Him in a fallen world.

The Spiritual Description

“In God *the* Father and *the* Lord Jesus Christ” pointed the Thessalonians to their spiritual sphere of existence. The “in” (en) denotes the new *sphere of communion and participation* and reminded them of their new sphere of spiritual life and security. As such, it focused them on their intimate union and spiritual relationship with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. But there is a significant point of syntax or grammar here. The one preposition “in” governs both phrases and links together both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This has a number of implications. We might paraphrase: “In relationship with God, as Father, and with Jesus Christ, as Lord.”²

So what are the implications this syntax suggests? “God *the* Father” marks out this assembly of believers as non-heathen and “*the* Lord Jesus Christ,” as non-Jewish. Also, the linking of both phrases with one preposition stresses the unity of Christ and the Father and is a sure evidence of Christ’s deity.

Note also that I have put the articles in italics (*the* Father and *the* Lord . . .) because in the original Greek text they are absent. In Greek grammar, omitting the articles does not make the nouns indefinite, but it does make the nouns, *Father* and *Lord*, somewhat qualitative. This draws our attention to the quality, nature or essence of God as He is revealed in the Father and the Son. God is one who is both a caring *Father* to believers in Christ (in the first person of the trinity) and our sovereign *Lord* (in the second person of the trinity, Jesus Christ).

“God the Father” draws our attention to God’s sovereign power and divinity which are manifest in creation (Ps. 19; Rom. 1:18f.), while the concept of God as the Father is the subject of special revelation through Scripture. Being our Father, God expects honor, obedience, and confidence from us as His children while He deals with us in grace, pity, and love (see Ps. 103:12-14; Matt. 6:25-34). At the same time this means that believers in Christ become His children by the new birth (John 1:12-13; 3:3f.; Gal. 3:26) who are to look to the Father for direction, provision, and protection (Matt. 6:34).

“And the Lord Jesus Christ” focuses our attention on who and what the Savior is to all who believe in Him. As Lord (*kurios*) Christ is God and the supreme Creator and Sustainer of the universe (John 1:1; 20:28; Phil. 2:5ff.; Col. 1:15ff.). *Kurios* is the Septuagint representation of the Hebrew *Yahweh* of the Old Testament. “Jesus is Lord” seems to have been a very early Christian credal confession, especially in Gentile churches. The name “Jesus” draws our attention to His humanity, but He is not just an exalted man, but the eternal God who became man, true humanity, that He might die for our sin (Phil. 2:5-8). As Christ, He is the one promised in the Old Testament, the Anointed One, the Messiah Savior. As Lord, He is also master and owner and deserves the full surrender of every believer and person in the world. Having spoken about the Savior as God becoming flesh in Philippians 2:5-10, Paul concludes with these remarks:

Phil. 2:9-11. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Remembering the truth of this union was to be a source of comfort in their persecution and testing. No matter what our sphere of trouble or pain, as believers we need to remember the spiritual sphere in which we also live as those who are in God the Father and in the Savior, the Lord Jesus. In this light, another text to recall is Colossians 3:1-4:

If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3

² Hogg and Vine, p. 21.

For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory (NASB).

The Greeting—Grace to You and Peace

Paul's normal greeting is "grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Greeting believers in this way emphasizes both the blessings of grace and peace as well as their source from God the Father and the Lord Jesus. Here, the Apostle had just mentioned both the Father and the Son so that focus is omitted, though surely understood. So while the normal, full greeting is missing here, Paul does this in part at the conclusion of this epistle (5:28). Regardless, the greeting teaches us: (1) there can be neither grace nor peace without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and (2) the fact that Christ is presented as the source of grace either alone, as in 5:28, or in association with the Father, as in other passages, is a clear testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ as one equal with the Father.

As an introduction to the significance and application of this portion of Paul's greeting, it would be well to compare chapter 5:1-3. One of the signs and characteristics of the last days will be man's clamor and pursuit of peace. But like a man trying to grasp oil with his hand, real and lasting peace will escape all those who seek it outside of the Lord. The society of the last days, as has been the case with the nations as a whole, will seek peace and safety by every avenue imaginable other than by God's grace in Christ. Mankind typically seeks it through the occult, through drugs and alcohol, materialism, entertainment, wealth and possessions, religionism (man seeking the approbation of God and men by good works) which rejects grace, humanism, astrology, pantheism, and the list goes on.

For the character and the results of man's search we might compare Isa. 57:20-21.

20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea, For it cannot be quiet, And its waters toss up refuse and mud. 21 "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."

Because the wicked turn away from God's grace, they forfeit God's peace and in its place toss up refuse and mud, a fitting picture for the consequences of any society that turns away from God's grace or perverts it in some manner. In other words, societies always experiences the garbage of moral decay and breakdown—breakdown in the home, in business, in government, in religion, in entertainment, and every sphere of life. We see this today in our country in ways that are almost beyond belief when one considers the origins of our nation which were rooted in the soil of the Bible.

In the end time this absence of peace will become global and difficult beyond words. As a result, men will seek solutions and peace in Satan's man and Satan's lie (2 Thess. 2). But of course, there can be no true peace apart from God's grace through Christ.

So we now turn to Paul's greeting ...

William Barclay writes: "When Paul took and put together these two great words, *grace* and *peace*, *charis* and *eire*,ne,, he was doing something very wonderful. He was taking the normal greeting phrases of two great nations and molding them into one"³

"Peace," *eire*,ne,, the Greek equivalent of *shalom* was the usual greeting among the Jews. "Grace," *chaire* (sg.) or *chairete* (pl.) 'rejoice, hail, greetings,' was a normal greeting among the Gentiles, and *charis* was the normal Greek greeting used in Greek correspondence. These two words were taken by the Holy Spirit into the service of God and greatly enlarged and deepened in their meaning. By themselves, each was missing something. It is only in Christ that both grace and peace are brought together into the biblical order of blessings.

The Purpose of the Greeting

The purpose of the greeting is seen in the translation, "to you." This is derived from what is called in Greek grammar, the dative of advantage. Paul's use of grace and peace in his greetings indicates a prayerful concern and desire for his readers because all men are in desperate need of God's grace and peace, as Isaiah 57:20-21 makes so clear. There is, then, an element of prayerful intercession in these greetings. Why? Because the Apostle desires his

³ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, The Westminster Press, 2nd Edition, Philadelphia, 1959, p. 15.

readers to comprehend more fully God's grace that they might also experience the peace which only God can give through Christ who is Himself both the manifestation of God's grace—the peace maker—and our peace.

At the same time, Paul is challenging his readers (us included) to a renewed commitment to know, comprehend, and live by the grace of God which gives God's peace. We all face a grave danger—either of failing or falling away from God's grace—seeking to live by our own abilities or works and strategies for life (see Jer. 2:12-13; 17:5; Gal. 5:4; Heb. 12:15).

This couplet of blessing is essential, an absolute necessity for life and ministry. Grace and peace compose the stuff out of which strength, capacity, and encouragement are made of.

The Order of the Divine Blessings

Biblically speaking, peace is always the product of knowing and appropriating the Grace of God in Jesus Christ. This order can never be reversed. Ignore the grace of God and you forfeit the peace of God. Peace is the product of grace (2 Pet. 1:2-4). So Peter exhorts us, “but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). The more we grasp and experience the grace of God, the more capacity we have to experience the many wonderful aspects of God's peace.

The Nature of the Divine Blessings

Understanding the nature of God's grace and peace in all their elements and aspects is tremendously important, but rather than giving space to this within this commentary please see the study entitled, “Grace and Peace” in the “Bible Studies / Spiritual Life / Miscellaneous” section of our Biblical Studies Foundation web site at www.bible.org.

Lesson 3: The Commendation and Thanksgiving (1 Thess. 1:2-10)

In the first section of the epistle proper (1:2–3:13), the personal and historical section), Paul and his missionary team¹ recall how the church was born (chapter 1), how it was nurtured (chapter 2), and how it was established more strongly in the faith (chapter 3). But in calling to mind the work at Thessalonica, the Apostle continued to express a heart of deep gratitude to the Lord for these Thessalonian believers (see 1:1; 2:13; 3:9).

What a powerful lesson there is here. Such an attitude of thanksgiving demonstrates Paul’s ever present perspective of life and ministry—the perspective of grace. Though it was Paul and his associates who brought the message to these believers and labored among them, these men realized the fruit of their labors was ultimately the product of God’s grace. If God Himself had not blessed their work, there would have been no converts and no church at Thessalonica. This is the perspective explained in 1 Corinthians 3:5-7.

5 What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, **but God was causing the growth.** 7 **So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.** (emphasis mine)

The Content of Their Commendation (1:2-7)

1:2 We thank God always for all of you as we mention you constantly in our prayers, **1:3** because we recall in the presence of our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. **1:4** We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, **1:5** in that our gospel did not come to you merely in speech, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much assurance (surely you recall the character we displayed when we came among you to help you). **1:6** And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, when you received the message with joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, despite great affliction. **1:7** As a result you became examples to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

The Means of Giving Thanks—Praying (vs. 2)

The Apostle commends the Thessalonians by expressing their gratitude to God for these believers, but the Greek sentence structure of verses 2-5 is long and somewhat complicated. There are three participles in the Greek text that draw our attention to the way Paul and his associates expressed their gratitude to the Lord. Some translations (NASB, KJV, etc.) show this with words ending in ‘ing’—“*making* mention ... constantly *bearing* in mind ... *knowing* ... your election.” With this in mind, I have sought to reflect this construction in the outline as it pertains to the prayers of the missionary team as follows: (a) the **means** of giving thanks—through praying; (b) the **occasion** for giving thanks—remembering your work of faith ... ; (c) the **cause** for giving thanks—knowing your election.

In nearly all of Paul’s epistles, he begins by giving thanks for his readers with Galatians being the only exception. Undoubtedly this was because of his deep disappointment over the works mentality (legalism) that had developed in the Galatian church. But there was no disappointment over the Thessalonians. In fact, they had become an example (1:7) so the missionaries continued to give thanks to God for this ministry of believers. This is emphasized by Paul’s words through the avenue of alliteration (the repetition of the same vowels or consonants at the beginning of words for emphasis). Note the words, “always for all of you,” *pantote peri panto*,,n.

Occasionally, as a product of our Internet ministry, we receive e-mails asking for ideas about how to find a good church and preferably, a good Bible teaching church. While I offer some suggestions of things to look for, I always

¹ Some argue that the plural here refers only to Paul because it is argued that the Apostle often uses the plural of himself alone citing 3:1-2 as an example. However, with the immediate mention of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy in verse 1, we should surely understand this to refer to Paul and his associates.

remind people that there are no perfect churches. Perhaps you've heard the humorous comment that if you find a church you think is perfect, don't join it. Why? Because you'd ruin it. But some churches are a lot closer to the ideal and the church of the Thessalonians, though not perfect, was such a church.

By way of application, what can we learn from Paul's and his associates' thankfulness for these believers?

(1) It demonstrates the grace perspective about anyone's ministry and productive results. God is the source of spiritual increase (1 Cor. 3:3-10).

(2) Though Paul was quick to give God credit and thank God for a fruitful ministry or change in the lives of others, he never lost sight of his personal responsibility to sow and water, or pray, preach, and plead (cf. 1 Cor. 15:9-11; Col. 1:28-2:2). Here is a wonderful illustration of the balance between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

(3) It provides an example for the kind of people we ought to be—thankful, faithful, and dependent workers.

(4) These were men who lived by praise with their focus on the Lord. We not only see the consistency of their prayers, but also their thankfulness. The emphasis on the consistent nature of their prayer life and thanksgiving in verses 2 and 3 is brought out by: (a) three continuous present tenses (giving thanks, making mention, and bearing in mind), (b) the adverbs "always" (vs. 2), and "constantly" (vs. 3); and (c) the phrase "in our prayers." Literally, this is "upon our praying" or "the praying of us" meaning perhaps, "at the time of our praying" which seems to point to a regular time for prayer. Realizing their own inadequacy in ministry, they regularly turned to the only one who is sufficient (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5-6).

(5) Paul's thankfulness and prayers for others were personal and specific. "Making mention" does not suggest just a casual remembrance. "Mention" is *meneia* and refers to "a remembrance in a special case, i.e., 'the direction of the memory to some particular object.'"²

(6) The Apostle was thankful for "all" of these believers. He was not just being polite. He was genuinely thankful for what God had done in each of their lives. This demonstrates the importance of every believer in the body of Christ.

(7) This reminds us that the freshness of our memory for an individual affects our prayers. But it is also true that the character of our lives will affect a person's remembrance. How important it is to be the kind of people that others love to remember.

The Occasion for Giving Thanks—Remembering (vs. 3)

Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father (KJV)

The occasion for giving thanks was their remembrance of the life-changing character that had occurred in these believers. This is described by the participle, *mne,,moneuontes*, "remembering," which introduces verse 3. But where does "without ceasing" or "continually" (*adialeipto,,s*) go? Does it go with the preceding clause, "making mention" or with the clause that follows, "remembering"? The question is answered well by Robert L. Thomas in the *Expositors Bible Commentary*.

Whether to understand *adialeiptös* (*adialeipto,,s*, "continually") (v. 2 of Gr. text) with the previous *poioumenoi* (*poioumenoi*, "making [mention]") clause or with the subsequent *mne,,moneuontes* (*mne,,moneuontes*, "remembering") presents a difficult choice. The connection of the adverb with prayer elsewhere in Paul (especially Rom 1:9; cf. 1 Thess 2:13; 5:17) argues for the former connection. The cognate adjective's relation to *mneian* (*mneian*, "remembrance") in 2 Tim 1:3 does the same. Yet its immediate juxtaposition with *mnëmoneuontes* and the presence of the *epi* (*epi*,

² Fritz Rienecker, edited by Cleon L. Rogers Jr., *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1976, 1980, p. 586.

“on,” “in” [v. 2]) phrase as another temporal qualification of *poioumenoi* tip the balance in favor of rendering the adverb with v. 3: “continually remember.”³

The character of the Thessalonians and the concern of the missionaries for these believers brought them regularly to mind when they went to the throne of grace to pray.

While verse 3 focuses our attention on three specific areas of remembrance as discussed below, the whole chapter really amplifies the character of this church as remembered by the missionary team. Using Wiersbe’s alliterated description, here is a summary of that character: they were an **effectual** people (vs. 3), an **elect** people (vs. 4), an **exemplary** people (vss. 5-7), an **enthusiastic** people (vs. 8), and an **expectant** people (vss. 9-10).⁴

With regard to the specifics mentioned in verse 3, we should note that the substance of what they remembered is found in three words: *work, labor, and endurance*. However, Paul was quick to add three more words which were vital to these three active nouns. To each was added one of the great words of the Christian triad—*faith, love, and hope*. These are three Christ-like qualities, but each is the fruit of the Spirit and the Word—the products of spiritual living. These qualities of *faith, love, and hope* are absolutely essential if one’s work, labor, and endurance are to result in true fruitfulness. The Lord’s rebuke to the church of Ephesus provides a stern warning regarding our Christian service or ministry. In Revelation 2:1, Christ told the church, “I know your deeds (works) and your toil (labor) and perseverance (endurance),” but there was something missing and they experienced His rebuke. The church of Ephesus had works, labor, and endurance, but there is no mention of the faith, the love, and the hope as seen at Thessalonica as the source of their Christian activity.

These three prepositional phrases are what we call subjective genitives in the Greek and stand to the word they modify **as root to fruit**. They point to *a work produced by faith, a labor motivated by love, and an endurance prompted by hope*. The NIV even translates it similarly. But, as Scripture makes abundantly clear, each is in turn the result of the ministry of the Spirit of God and the Word of God in the heart and life of believers.

Their Work of Faith

“Work” is the Greek *ergon*, which refers to “what is wrought or made, a work, a deed, action, or accomplishment.” It is “work” (singular) not “works” (plural) and seems to look at a specific work or deed performed. “Faith” is *pistis*, the normal Greek word for that quality of life that is to characterize the believer’s life from start to finish. We are saved by faith and we are to live and walk by faith (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 1:17; 2 Cor. 5:7). Of course, the key element of faith is the object of faith. Is the object of faith able, willing, and available to save? Only in Christ are all these saving qualities found (see Phil. 2:5f.; Heb. 2:18; 5:7; 7:25; 13:5-6). Faith in the right object is also the fruit of ministry of the Spirit and the Word of God for “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

Contextually, the work of faith undoubtedly refers to **a past deed** and is explained in verse 8 as “your faith toward God.” This is then further amplified in verse 9b, “how you turned to God from idols.” Faith in the Savior caused them to reject or turn away from their previous vain confidence in their empty idols. We must remember that faith in the Savior is the product of a biblical understanding of the person and work of Christ as God’s complete solution for our sin and need. People who are steeped in idolatry often just want to add Jesus to their pantheon of false Gods, but true faith in Christ necessitates, through an accurate grasp of the gospel and the issues, faith alone in Christ alone. For a quick commentary on consequences of faith alone in Christ alone see Acts 18:18-27.

Their Labor of Love

“Labor” is the Greek *kopos*, which refers to “laborious toil, trouble, difficulty.” The labor of love is **a present labor** and is explained in verse 9c, “to serve a living and true God.” Out of a deep love for the Lord and His people, the work of faith extended itself into a toil even to the point of weariness for the service of God and those He wanted them to minister to. Paul provided an excellent model for such labor to the point of weariness (see 2:1f.; and Col. 1:29–2:2).

³ Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, p. 242.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, pp. 23f.

Their Endurance of Hope

“Endurance” is the Greek *hupomone*, from *hupo*, “under” and *meno*, “to remain.” The idea is to remain under the pressure regardless of the intensity or length of time. So it means “endurance, patience, fortitude, steadfastness, perseverance.” But it was not just an endurance of resignation, but one stimulated by hope. The “endurance of hope” is a **present endurance** prompted by a **future prospect**, a hope spelled out in verse 10, “to wait for His Son from heaven.” The best commentary I can think of for this quality is spelled out for us by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:14-18. In a context where Paul has recounted his endurance in the extreme pressures of his ministry for the gospel, he shows us how endurance is prompted by an eternal focus. He writes:

4:14 We do so because we know that the one who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence. **4:15** For all these things are for your sake, so that the grace that is including more and more people may cause thanksgiving to increase to the glory of God. **4:16** Therefore we do not despair, but even if our physical body is wearing away, our inner person is being renewed day by day. **4:17** For our momentary light suffering is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, **4:18** because we are not looking at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal (2 Cor. 4:14-18).

Here in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 the object of their hope is expressed by the words, “in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.” This points to the anchor and character of their hope. It was a living hope based on a living Savior and His exalted presence before the Father through resurrection and ascension to God’s right hand in heaven. From that exalted place He will return for His people. It is somewhat like those passages that speak of Christ at God’s right hand where He sits enthroned until He personally returns when His enemies will be made a footstool for His feet (Luke 20:41-43; Acts 2:35; Heb. 1:13; 10:13).

The Cause for Giving Thanks—Knowing (vss. 4-7)

4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice (election) of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (NASB).

As mentioned previously, the participle *knowing* introduces the next section which really extends from verse 4 through verse 10 and points the reader to the cause for the thanksgiving of Paul and his associates. Though the primary focus is on verse 4, the reason for the Apostle’s conviction of their election as brethren beloved by God is expressed first in verse 5 and again in verses 6ff. The first reason is seen in the character of the ministry of the missionaries, and second in the response and character of the Thessalonians as detailed in verses 6-7. Then verses 8-10 simply amplify and confirm the statements of verses 6-7.

The Confidence and Character of the Missionaries (vss. 4-5)

Paul begins by addressing them as “brethren” (or brothers and sisters).⁵ This was an affectionate term which highlighted their new spiritual relationship as members of the family of God, as those who had been born into the family of God by the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:11-13; 3:3-6; Tit. 3:5).

This relationship is then intensified by further describing them as “beloved by God.” “Beloved” is a perfect passive participle of the verb *agapao*, “to love.” The perfect focuses on the abiding results, the fixed condition of being the grace recipients (the passive voice) of God’s love. The participle may be adverbial, pointing to the cause of the election, “since you are loved of God,” or better, it is attributive adding a further description of their new relationship

⁵ Literally, the Greek text has “brothers” (*adelphoi*), but this Greek word may be used for “brothers and sisters” or “fellow Christians” as here (see Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media, where considerable nonbiblical evidence for the plural *ajdelfoiv* meaning “brothers and sisters” is cited).

with God. Perhaps Paul intended a blending of both ideas. Paul normally used the verbal adjective, *agape*, *tos*, “beloved,” but the use of the participle lays greater stress on the “active exercise of God’s love as already consummated and resulting in a fixed status of being loved (perfect tense).”⁶ Though persecuted by a hostile world, they were still the recipients of God’s fatherly love and care.

The missionaries were thankful for the Thessalonian believers because they were confident of their salvation as those selected or chosen of God. “Chosen” is the Greek *ekloge*, “selection, election, choosing.” With this word, we are confronted with the doctrine of election, a doctrine that has different effects on various people. It makes some people angry, confuses many, and even seems to frighten others. Why? Because in this doctrine man’s finite mind meets head on with the infinite mind of God and a truth that really falls into the category of an antinomy. An antinomy occurs when we have what appears to be a contradiction between principles or conclusions that are equally necessary and true.

That God has chosen to bless some individuals with eternal life is clearly taught in many places in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Deut. 4:37; 7:6-7; Isa. 44:1-2; Rom. 9; Eph. 1:4-6, 11; Col. 3:12; 2 Thes. 2:13). Equally clear is the fact that God holds each individual personally responsible for his decision to trust or not to trust in Jesus Christ (cf. John 3; Rom. 5). The difficulty in putting divine election and human responsibility together is understanding how both can be true. *That* both are true is taught in the Bible. *How* both can be true is apparently incomprehensible to finite human minds; no one has ever been able to explain this antinomy satisfactorily. This task transcends human mental powers, much as seeing angels transcends human visual powers and hearing very high-pitched sounds transcends human auditory powers.⁷

Having affirmed their conviction of his readers’ selection as the beloved of God, without elaboration on the doctrine of election, the Apostle quickly begins to set forth the reasons for this conclusion. As Thomas points out, “Paul cannot leave unproved so direct a statement regarding election. So vv. 5-10 give two grounds for the knowledge just asserted. The former of these relates to the experience of the missionaries themselves (v. 5),”⁸ and the other reason relates to the changed lives of the Thessalonians themselves (vss. 6-10).

5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

It is significant that one of the reasons Paul was so confident of their salvation was the way the gospel had come to the Thessalonians during the missionaries’ stay in that city. Four characteristics are given which describe this coming of the gospel: one is negative, “not in word only,” and three are positive, “but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” In our day of Madison Avenue techniques and manipulation and pressure, may we grasp this as a cleansing breath of fresh air.

Paul concludes verse 5 with reference to their manner of life as the missionaries who brought the gospel message. Note the last clause, “just as you know what kind of men ...” This does two things:

(1) It restricts the four characteristics to the missionaries. Some have claimed the words “with power” and “with full assurance” refer to the recipients and the effects manifested in these new believers, but the words, “just as you know what kind of men ...,” restricts it to the missionaries.

(2) It shows the focus is primarily on the gospel, the message, because it is the message which is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). The lives of preachers and teachers of the Word are important as chapter 2 makes so very clear, but above all, what we do with the gospel and how we handle it is an issue of utmost importance.

So what are the four characteristics which describe how the gospel came to Thessalonica?

⁶ Gaebelein, p. 243.

⁷ John F Walvoord, and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985, electronic media.

⁸ Gaebelein, p. 243.

The first one is the negative, “not in words only.” Of course, the gospel message did come with words since words are basic to intelligent communication of God’s truth. The gospel is a message, the witness to the work of God in the person and work of Christ for which the right words are crucial. However, this message was not merely in words. Men’s words can be very eloquent, persuasive, and entertaining and move people emotionally and intellectually, but such can’t save them and bring them into the family of God (see 1 Cor. 2:1ff.).

Next, the words, “but also,” point us to the three positive elements. “But” is *alla*, a strong conjunction of contrast. Further, each of the three positive characteristics have the preposition “in” (*en*), which makes them each distinct issues, though of course related.

First, in contrast to mere words, the gospel came “with power.” But to what does this refer? Some would like to relate this to miraculous works as authenticating signs, but normally, the plural, “powers,” would be used if that were meant (see Matt. 13:54; 14:2; 1 Cor. 12:10; Gal. 3:5; Heb. 2:4; 6:5). Others would relate it to the inward power in the messengers as a result of the filling of the Spirit, but this important characteristic is brought out by the next prepositional phrase, “with or by the Spirit.” Rather, could it not refer simply to the inherent power of the gospel as the “Word of God which is alive and powerful” (Heb. 4:12)? It is not just a message of words, but a message which is living, active, powerful and able to bring men into a saving relationship with the living God for one simple reason: It is God’s Word and it is truth. It is the true revelation of God’s activity in Jesus Christ. See also the Apostle’s comment in chapter 2:13.

“And in the Holy Spirit” takes us to the second of the positive elements that gave these missionaries their assurance. Paul and his associates knew they were indwelt by the Spirit as their helper or enabler for ministry (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7f; Acts 1:8). The Spirit of God, as the third person of the Trinity, is called “the Spirit of Truth” because of His role in taking the truth of the Word and revealing it to men (see John 14:17; 15:26; 16:8-13; 1 John 4:6; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 2:6-16). Because of the blindness and hardness of men’s heart, they are powerless to even desire, much less grasp the life-giving truth of the gospel (cf. Rom. 3:11), but by the pre-salvation ministry of the Spirit who led the missionaries (see Acts 16:6-10), who prepares hearts (Acts 16:14), and who convicts and draws men to God (Rom. 2:4; John 12:32; 16:8f.), some hear, grasp, and believe the gospel and experience its saving power (see also 2 Thess. 2:13).

Third, the words “and with full conviction” point us to the faith and confidence of the missionaries. It was not in their looks, in their beaming personalities, in their eloquence, oratorical skill, nor in their methodology. They preached with conviction knowing and resting in the fact they were preaching the powerful, life-giving truth of God fortified by the powerful ministry of the Spirit of God who worked both in the missionaries and in their hearers.

With the words, “just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake,” we see the perfect balance needed in effective ministry. The message, of course, is all important, but so is the life of the messenger. As Paul does in several places (1:5, 9; 2:1, 10), he appealed to his readers’ first-hand knowledge of the missionaries. As Paul and his companions had preach a Spirit-empowered message, so they had also lived unselfish lives that were fully consistent with that message while they were in Thessalonica. What an important lesson for all of us. If we are not careful, our lives speak so loudly no one wants to listen to what we say.

The Conduct and Character of the Thessalonians (vss. 6-7)

1:6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, when you received the message with joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, despite great affliction. **1:7** As a result you became examples to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

With verse 6 we are introduced to the second evidence of their election, the effects of the gospel as it changed the lives of the Thessalonians. A number of results were evident. (1) They “received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit” and were saved. (2) They did so “despite great affliction.” (3) They then became “imitators” of Paul and also the Lord. (4) They developed spiritually to a point of becoming “examples to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” (5) And their testimony was such that they developed a witness “in every place,” a hyperbole for the broad impact of their testimony in the surrounding regions.

They received the message in faith (vs. 6b)

Though the Apostle mentions becoming imitators first, chronologically the first evidence of their election had to be their reception of the message. “Receive” is *dechomai*, which means “to readily receive information and to regard

it as true—‘to receive readily, to accept, to believe.’”⁹ They readily received and believed the message, literally, “the word,” not the written Word of the New Testament, which was not yet in existence, but the gospel message which undoubtedly included the fundamentals of doctrine so vital to Christian growth and maturity. “Received” is an aorist participle which describes the conditions that led to their changed lives. Because the participle is in the aorist tense, it may just look at the initial reception of the message, but the aorist may also look at many acts pulled together as one historical fact. Thus, the participle may take into account all the teaching they received from the missionary team while they were at Thessalonica. The context favors this because of the mention of their afflictions which more than likely occurred after the missionaries were forced to leave. As Bruce points out:

Nothing is said in Acts 17:1-9 about persecution directed against the Thessalonian converts in general; it is against the missionaries and secondarily against their hosts (“Jason and some of the brethren”) that the rabble is stirred up by disapproving Jews. It might be expected that, when the missionaries got away safely, resentment against them would be turned against their followers; according to 2:14, it was at the hands of their compatriots that they met with persecution. Thus they shared the lot not only of the missionaries but of the Lord himself. As Paul might have put it, they experienced “the fellowship of his sufferings” (cf. Phil 3:10).¹⁰

They became imitators of the missionaries and the Lord (vs. 6a)

The teaching and example of the missionaries (though only for a few weeks) and the afflictions they faced plus the ever present ministry of the Spirit were the tools God used to produce spiritual growth and changed lives. Our word *imitate* may lead to the wrong impression. Christian imitation has nothing to do with outward conformity where someone merely copies the actions, mannerisms, or speech of another. The Greek word is *mimeteis* from *mimeo-mai*, “to imitate, emulate, use as a model.” The main idea here is to follow someone as an ideal model or example, but, as the New Testament context makes clear, this is not merely a matter of external conformity, but change from the inside out through receiving and following the spiritual truths of the faith as seen in the life of the model.

The biblical plan and order of modeling and following is as follows:

(1) With Christ and the Heavenly Father as their own personal model (John 15:13; 1 Pet. 2:21; Eph. 5:1), mature Christian leaders need to recognize they have a vital responsibility to model the reality and character of Christ to those they teach and minister to (1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:7; 1 Pet. 5:3).

(2) They may even encourage others to imitate or follow their example as long as they take heed to their own walk (1 Tim. 4:12-16) and are sure they are seeking to follow the example of the Savior themselves (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:9).

(3) The ultimate goal of the leader must always be to help others to become imitators of Christ Himself. At first, disciples became imitators of their spiritual parents or teachers, the normal and natural pattern for spiritual growth, but teacher and student alike must recognize that the ultimate goal is to become like the Savior who is our perfect model and objective (1 Pet. 2:21). Since Paul’s objective was to be like Christ, he could encourage his disciples to imitate his walk, but always with the goal in mind of imitating the character of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1)

(4) The basic order or process is: (a) Leaders are to imitate Christ (1 Cor. 11:1) that they might be models for others (1 Pet. 5:3); (b) new converts and the flock as a whole are to imitate their leaders, assuming of course their leaders are following Christ (Heb. 13:7); (c) other churches are to recognize their responsibility to be a model of godliness or Christ-likeness as the Thessalonians were to the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess. 1:7); (d) all are to become imitators of God who is revealed to us in Christ (Eph. 5:1).

Following the example of others has nothing to do with imitating the style or charismatic personalities of certain Christian leaders. What we are to model for others and imitate in others is Christian character as illustrated in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) or in Paul’s attitude and behavior as it pertained to some of the doubtful issues like eating meat offered to idols. Paul’s pattern was that of love, putting the needs of others above himself as Christ did for us. It is really this Paul had in mind contextually in 1 Corinthians 11:1 when he said, “Be imitators of me as I am

⁹ Johannes P. Louw, and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989, electronic media.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 16.

of Christ” (for the immediate context see 1 Cor. 10:31). The same principle is seen in the context of 2 Thessalonians 3:9 as it pertained to working to support oneself and one’s family (see 3:6-15).

The Thessalonians became imitators of Paul and the Savior, and of the churches in Judea by the experience of Christ’s character in the midst of suffering and persecution (see John 15:18-21; 16:33; Acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 2:14; 3:4; 2 Tim. 3:12). We must not forget that while all suffering is painful, it, along with the ministry of the Word and the Spirit, are tools God uses to promote genuine spiritual growth and Christ-like change.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:3-5 NASB).

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have *its* perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11).

They became an example for believers everywhere (vs. 7)

“As a result you became examples to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” The only church Paul ever calls an example or model is the Thessalonian church. Though not perfect, it gives us a pattern for what churches ought to be both in spiritual growth and ministry. The pattern is developed through the principle of Christian imitation mentioned in verse 6. Verse 7 flows out of the statement of verse 6 as evident in the words, “As a result” (ho,ste, points here to an actual result, “so that”) you became examples ...

The Confirmation of Their Commendation (1:8-10)

1:8 For from you the message of the Lord has echoed forth not just in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place reports of your faith in God have spread, so that we do not need to say anything. **1:9** For people everywhere report how you welcomed us and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God **1:10** and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus our deliverer from the coming wrath.

In keeping with Paul’s words of commendation in verse 3, verses 8-10 confirm the Thessalonians’ “work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope.” Verse 8 looks at their *past work of faith* with the words, “your faith toward God.” Verse 9 focuses on their *present labor of love*, as those who had “turned to God from idols,” and began serving the living and true God. Then, with verse 10 and the words, “to wait for His Son from heaven,” Paul confirms their *prospective endurance of hope*.

Their Work of Faith Confirmed (vs. 8)

Verse 7 tells us the Thessalonian church became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. But how did they do this? Paul explains in verses 8-10. Verse 8 explains *how* they became an example: The word of the Lord effectively echoed forth throughout the region as an expression and product of their faith. Verses 9-10 explain *why* they became an example. Because they had received the ministry and teaching of the missionaries, they turned to God from idols and this resulted in a dynamic effect—they began to serve God and wait up for His Son from heaven.

One of the logical, natural, and necessary products of imitating the character of the missionaries and the Savior was to become a witness to others of the saving grace of God. Before looking at the details of their witness as examples, we can summarize their witness in three distinct developments:

1. Their witness echoed throughout the surrounding regions.
2. The report declared the drastic change of life (turning to God from idols they began to serve ...).

3. They had a new hope and focus for life; they were living in the light of the return of Christ, a hope which gave them endurance and courage.

The first characteristic concerned how their witness had spread. The message of the Lord (literally, “the word of the Lord”) echoed forth from this church. “Of the Lord” can mean either, “from the Lord as the source and authority” or “about the Lord as the content of the witness.” Both are in fact true and this may be one of those intended divine ambiguities.

The term “sounded forth” or “echoed” is the Greek *execheo*, “to cause to resound, sound or ring forth.” It seems that the Apostle saw the Thessalonians as amplifiers who first received the gospel message but then sent it reverberating on its way with increased power and scope much like an echo in the mountains.

But how did they accomplish this? Does this suggest they immediately became missions oriented and sought to take the gospel to others through missionary activity? Or was this simply the product of others hearing and telling about the changed lives of these believers who lived in the midst of this pagan city? Or does it include both? Commentators perceive this differently. In point of fact, we are not told exactly how their witness spread so we can only guess.

Apparently it was not through an organized evangelistic campaign that their witness went forth, though Paul’s preaching in Thessalonica and elsewhere illustrates this approach. But it was through the personal lives and testimonies of these transformed individuals that neighbors heard about their **faith in God**. As they went the gospel was heard **everywhere**, so an apostolic missionary campaign was not needed.¹¹

After receiving the gospel, the Thessalonians took it to others. It was Paul’s mission strategy to plant churches in the population centers and to let these churches take the good news to the surrounding districts. From Thessalonica the word of the Lord “rang out” (the Greek word *execheo* denotes a loud ringing sound—giving us our word *echo*). That message was still being heard when Paul wrote. In fact it had gone beyond the border of Greece. Could it be that Aquila and Priscilla had heard about the witness of the Thessalonians in Rome and told Paul about it?¹²

The meaning is, that their conversion and its circumstances were so noted, that they carried the gospel through the province as if by the ringing peal of a trumpet. The rumour of what had happened at Thessalonica sped its way through Greece, and carried with it the gospel—sounded abroad loudly, fully, distinctly, the blessed message.¹³

Their Labor of Love Confirmed (vs. 9)

The second element that characterized their witness concerned the actual report about the tremendous change that had occurred in the lives of these believers at Thessalonica. Before receiving the word of the Lord, many of the Thessalonians had been idolaters—those in bondage to the worship of vain idols with all the perversions that accompanied pagan idolatry. Even some of those described by Luke as “God-fearing Greeks” were perhaps still battling with the pulls of their past, for though they were God-fearers they had not experienced the life-changing power of the gospel. But having welcomed God’s message by faith, they put their trust in the Savior and, as a result, became those who served the living and true God.

Though subtle, this order of events as seen in the tenses of this chapter is significant. Because of man’s proclivity to add something to the gospel message of faith in Christ (believe and be baptized, believe and give up your sins, etc.), or to simply attempt to add Christ to some other system of religion, it is important that we see the order here. First, they believed the message and in doing so, they turned to God from idols, i.e., they put their trust in God

¹¹ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

¹² Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1989, electronic media.

¹³ John Eaide, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians*, Edited by William Young, MacMillan & Co., 1877, Reprint by James and Klock Christian Publishing Co, Minneapolis, 1977, p. 47.

through faith in Christ rather than in their idol worship which kept them in bondage and fear. They were then able to serve the living and true God.

In verse 8, the Apostle first speaks of “their faith toward God.” Literally, the Greek text has, “the faith of you, the one toward God (he,, pistis humo,,n he,, pros ton theon).” The article is repeated to emphatically call attention to the new object of their faith. Men have many objects (religion, money, good works, idols) of faith (things they trust in for salvation and sanctification, for security and significance), but there is only one object that saves us from sin’s penalty and power and gives eternal life; it’s the Lord Jesus.

In verse 9, as he did in verse 6, Paul gives us the order of events or the process that brought about the change in the Thessalonians.

(1) “For people everywhere report how you welcomed us” (literally, “... report what sort of entrance we had to you.”) Both the words “entrance” and the past tense verb, “we had” (an aorist indicative pointing to a historic fact) refer to the original preaching and reception of the gospel message.

(2) “How you turned to God from idols” also points to a past historic event (also an historic aorist), namely their conversion by faith in Christ, the point when they turned to God in faith. The verb here is *epistrepho*,, “to turn, return” and was used of a change of mind or course of action. Idolatry in any of its forms is the product of those who have turned away from God (see Rom. 1:18f.). Faith in Christ is the first step in returning to God. In keeping with verse 8, turning to God involves faith in God through Christ, as the whole of the New Testament teaches. It is in essence the concept of repentance; it means turning **from** former sources of trust (whatever that might be) **to** trust in God’s plan of salvation and life through Christ. This also fits with verse 6 which shows the change in their lives was the product of welcoming the gospel in faith.

(3) With the words, “to serve the living and true God” (vs. 9) and “to wait up for His Son ...” (vs. 10), Paul pointed to two results of turning to God from idols. “To serve” and “to wait” are both infinitives which may point to either a purpose or a result. Further, both infinitives are in the present tense to express the truth of a continued lifestyle that characterized these believers as a pattern for all Christians. They were living as bondservants in view of the hope of Christ’s imminent return. In turning toward God and putting their faith in Him, they were also turning their back on idols as a source of trust and as a way of life. Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, never by our works (Rom. 3:21-30; Eph. 2:8-9). But salvation was also designed to transform our lives, changing us into the bondservants of God as we learn to continue to live by faith in God with eternal goals, for the just or righteous shall live by faith (Rom. 1:7; 6:1-23; Eph. 2:10).

The Thessalonians did not put off the old life as a religious work in order to be saved. Rather it was their understanding and belief in the message of the gospel and its revelation of God in Christ that led to salvation. This both caused and enabled them to then turn from their old life with its false hopes and perversions to one of serving God as one who is living and true.

This new message, the Word of the Lord, revealed the foolishness of their faith in empty idols and pointed them to the truth of God as He is revealed in Scripture. He is truly a living and true God who is revealed through the person and work of Christ, His Son. The nature of the true God as living and true is brought out in the Greek text by the absence of the Greek article with the adjectives, “living and true.” This anarthrous construction lays stress on the quality and nature of God as one who is living and true in contrast to man’s various idols, which are lifeless, false, and useless.

If one simply tries to add Christ to his pantheon of idols or to some other way of salvation he has failed to grasp and receive the message of the gospel. To do this is in essence to reject Christ as the way, the truth, and the life and stems from a failure to believe in Him as the Revelation of God to man and the Redeemer of man. On the other hand, to believe in Him biblically speaking is to first recognize that He alone, as God’s Son, the God-man Savior, is the way to God and the means of salvation through His death and finished work of the cross. To grasp this truth and believe it also means, as an outworking of faith, the repudiation and rejection of other sources of hope or trust for salvation. So the Thessalonians turned their back on idolatry because of their “faith toward God” (vs. 8). Then verse 9 explains the results that begin to occur as one grows in Christ: a turning to God as one’s source of life and away from idols to serve God and wait for His Son.

While we must turn from our past sources of trust for salvation, learning to serve the Lord is a process of growth (see 4:1ff. and cf. Rom. 6:1f.; and 12:1f.). As Christians, our ability to serve the Lord will always be hampered as

long as we cling to those things from which we seek our security and happiness. Ability and willingness to consistently serve the Lord is related to depending on Him as the living and true God, as the only one able to truly direct our lives and give us significance, security, and satisfaction. Closely related is the next point (vs. 10), learning to live in the light of His sure return.

Their Endurance of Hope Confirmed (vs. 10)

There are several things we should note about their hope as an example for us.

First, there is the *Nature of Their Hope*. This is seen in the word “wait,” the Greek *anameno*, which comes from *ana*, “up, upward,” and *meno*, “to remain, abide.” It means “to remain in a place and/or a state of mind, with expectancy concerning a future event—to await, to wait for.” Our phrase, “wait up for” catches the meaning nicely. Think of a parent who, in anticipation of a son or daughter’s arrival, waits up eagerly and expectantly. *Anameno*, means to expect, with the added notion of waiting patiently and confidently, but not necessarily in a passive way. How many mothers just sit back and wait for the arrival of that son who has been gone for so long? As part of their expectation, the mothers I have known were busy as a bee making pies, cookies, and preparing the foods they know their son loves. The Greek tense is present, which suggests this as an attitude and as a pattern that characterized and gave direction and courage to the way they lived, just as a mother’s expectation affects her plans and preparation.

We need to compare this to the attitude of those who live only for this life—trying to ‘get all the gusto they can because they only go around once’! There is a phrase used in the book of Revelation for what we might call *the worldling*, for those who live only for what they can get out of this life by way of rewards—position, power, praise, possessions, etc. Literally in the Greek text they are called “earth dwellers” (cf. Rev. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8) because their entire lives are centered on this life without much if any thought for the future. In the Bible, believers are called pilgrims, aliens, strangers, or sojourners because this life is to be viewed as a temporary sojourn. The believer who is serious about following the Savior must learn to see himself as a temporary resident on assignment (like an ambassador) while waiting for the return of the Savior. Even now there should be deep within us a longing for our true home which the Lord is preparing for us (John 14:1f.).

Christians who are prosperous and comfortable on earth may give money generously to Christian work but usually find it hard to think of heaven as *home*. It is one thing to speak piously about dying as “going home,” but quite another to “put our money where our mouth is.” Tragically, many who talk piously about “home” display little evidence of longing to be there. Home in Florida is more attractive. Tension exists between home on earth and home in heaven, and there are practical ways in which we can discover where our real interest lies.¹⁴

In warning His disciples about being anxious over the various details of life like clothing or food, He told them, “Do not accumulate for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But accumulate for yourself treasures in heaven, ...” (Matt. 6:19-20). He then followed this up with “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (vs. 21), words that challenge us to take a hard look at our values. Do they lie in this world or in the world to come? Are we living with a view to the glories of the future kingdom that will be ushered by the Lord after He comes for the church and at the end of the Tribulation, or are we earth bound. Truly, our perspective or outlook about this life determines our values which in turn determine our priorities and decisions as to how we live.

However, in anticipating the return of the Lord, Christians can have the wrong perspective or outlook, however, with regard to His coming as seen in the following:

Some of the Thessalonian believers quit their work and became idle busybodies, arguing that the Lord was coming soon. But if we really believe the Lord is coming, we will prove our faith by keeping busy and obeying His Word. Our Lord’s parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11-27) teaches that we must “occupy” (be busy; in this case, invest the money) till He returns.¹⁵

But how could they be so confident of the return of this person for whom they waited? This is found in the next point.

¹⁴ John White, *The Cost of Commitment*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1976, p. 67.

¹⁵ Wiersbe, p. 32.

Second, there is the *Object of Their Hope*. Their hope is in a person here identified in several ways, all of which give certainty to their hope.

(1) This person is identified as “His Son,” meaning God’s Son, the divine Son of God. But this person is also the one called “Jesus,” a man. This is the God-man. He is one who is both God and man united together in one person by the incarnation. As God He could not be man’s representative, but as a man, He could represent us and die for our sin. As man He could be tempted, though as the God-man, He would not and could not sin. As God He could give us not just life, but eternal life and not just righteousness, but perfect righteousness.

(2) He is identified as coming from heaven. This identifies Him as the one who ascended in a cloud to the right hand of God, the place of authority, rule, and majesty. Literally, He comes “from the heavens” (plural) as the one who will pass through the heavens from the heaven of heavens, the very throne of God. This is the place of sovereign rule and authority (see Matt. 28:18).

(3) He is the one “whom He raised from the dead.” This marks out this person as the resurrected One and thus the basis for a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3). The resurrection is that momentous event which marked out Jesus Christ as the Son of God, as the Savior, and the means of forgiveness and justification before God (Rom. 1:4; 4:24-25; John 16:8-11; Acts 17:31).

(4) He is identified as “Jesus our deliverer from the coming wrath.” He is one who is a deliverer, a savior from wrath. But to what does the coming wrath refer? The following comments from the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* succinctly summarize the issues.

The wrath of God will be poured out on unrighteous people because of their failure to trust in Christ (John 3:36; Rom. 1:18). This happens at many times and in many ways, the great white throne judgment being the most awful occasion (Rev. 20:11-15). But the “time of trouble for Jacob” (Jer. 30:4-7), also called “the Great Tribulation” (Rev. 7:14), will be a period in history during which God’s wrath will be poured out on the earth as never before (cf. Rev. 6-19).

Was Paul thinking of a specific time in which God’s wrath would be poured out (1 Thes. 1:10), or was he referring to the outpouring of God’s wrath on unbelievers in a more general sense? Paul, the Thessalonian believers, and Christians today will escape all aspects of God’s wrath, general and specific, including the Tribulation period. The clear implication of this verse is that Paul hoped in the Lord’s imminent return. Otherwise Paul would have told his readers to prepare for the Tribulation.

In the phrase “from the coming wrath” the word translated “from” means that Christians are kept from it, not taken out of it. The same verb (**rescues**) and preposition (**from**) are used in 2 Corinthians 1:10 where Paul said he was delivered from a deadly peril. Obviously this does not mean Paul died and was resurrected. Christians will be kept away from God’s wrath, not just kept safe through it (cf. comments on Rev. 3:10).

This chapter, like every chapter in this epistle, closes with a reference to the return of Jesus Christ (1 Thes. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18, 5:23).¹⁶

Christians may be chastened by the Lord as a Father chastens His children (Heb. 13:5f). This is not punishment for sin since Christ bore that for us on the cross. Rather, it is discipline designed to train us in righteousness and to stop bad behavior. Christians have the Lord’s promise that they will not come into judgment for sin (see John 5:24-25 and Rom. 8:1). So it is true, Christians are delivered from all aspects of God’s wrath in the form of judgment poured out against sin, but “the coming wrath” of verse 10 is best understood to refer to a particular wrath, the wrath of the Tribulation. Some reasons are as follows:

1. “Wrath” has the definite article, actually, it is a restrictive attributive, “the wrath, the coming one,” and this suggests something very specific which was on the minds of the Thessalonians as seen later in this epistle (5:1f).

¹⁶ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

2. Chronologically, the next great expression of God's wrath is the Tribulation which is a time of God's wrath poured out on a Christ rejecting world. The judgment of the Great White Throne (see Rev. 20), a judgment of all the unbelieving of all generations, does not occur until after the millennial reign of Christ which occurs after the Tribulation and the events of Revelation 6-19.
3. In this book, the resurrection of believers and the deliverance of believers are closely related or tied together (see 4:13f.). The implication is that deliverance comes through the rapture.
4. The present tense of "wait" suggest that "wrath" here is the Tribulation. They expected His return at any moment and it is His imminent return that delivers them and all believers.

What exactly are we waiting for as Christians? We are waiting for the personal and visible return of a person, the person of Jesus Christ whose return is imminent, it could be at any moment. His return will mean the rapture as described in chapter 4:13f. and will mean a resurrected glorified body (Phil. 3:20-21), being taken to a new home prepared for us as His bride (John 14:1-6), and it will mean the Bema or judgment seat of Christ, a place where He will reward us according to our faithfulness (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:9-10).

Conclusion

What we have seen in chapter 1 concerns the report of those who had witnessed the changed lives of these believers in the midst of the most difficult of circumstances—paganism, moral perversion, and persecution. Yet, they not only came to Christ, but they grew, endured, and became a resounding witness. It is a wonderful testimony to the power of the gospel or the Word of God which reveals the glories of the person and work of Christ for a dying world. But, as mentioned in the introduction, God uses men to take this message. As such, the changed lives of these Thessalonian believers is also a witness to the ministry of dedicated people who, believing in and resting in the power of His Word, were willing to give their lives as living sacrifices to the Lord and to others in preaching and teaching this Word. The nature and reality of this will be seen in chapter 2.

Lesson 4: A Compelling Example for Ministry (1 Thess. 2:1-12)

Introduction

In chapter 1, Paul begins with a salutation or greeting (1:1) followed by thanksgiving for the work of God and the response of the Thessalonians to the Gospel (1:2-10). In doing this he described them as a pattern or model for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia because of the way the word of the Lord had sounded forth from this body of believers. This is then followed by a review of Paul's ministry (really the ministry of his team) to the Thessalonians (2:1-12).

As we approach chapter 2, we need to remember that the occasion for this chapter was the slander Paul had received from the religious Judaizers who claimed he was only out for personal gain. So Paul reviewed their ministry to silence these attacks, not because he was concerned about the Thessalonians' approval, but to protect the work the Lord had accomplished through him and his partners.

In verses 1-12, the Apostle uses two instructive analogies to describe his ministry: (1) that of a faithful steward (vss. 1-6), and (2) as that of loving parents: first as a loving mother (vss. 7-8), and then as a concerned father (vss. 9-12).

In the process of these two chapters, we are given a glimpse of Paul the evangelist and Paul the edifier or builder of believers. What a compelling and wonderful model for us today for here are two of the main purposes of the church—reaching and teaching. In a day like ours when the authority of God's Word is being ignored and when the church and its ministers so often turn to human methods and operate out of false motives, this chapter is not only powerfully instructive, but it stands as a strong rebuke to so much of what we see happening in ministry today.

They Served as Faithful Stewards Entrusted With the Gospel (2:1-6)

2:1 For you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, about our coming to you: it has not proven to be purposeless. **2:2** But although we suffered earlier and were mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of much opposition. **2:3** For the appeal we make does not come from error or impurity or with deceit, **2:4** but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we declare it, not to please people but God, who examines our hearts. **2:5** For we never appeared with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is our witness— **2:6** nor to seek glory from people, either from you or from others,

The text may be divided into three parts: their manner (2:1-2), their motives and methods (2:3b-6), and their message and means (2:2, 3a; see also vss. 9 and 13).

Their Manner—They Were Persistent Against Pressure and Pain (vss. 1-2)

Verse 1 was a clear declaration of the nature of their coming, but notice how he did this through a strong appeal to the Thessalonians' personal knowledge of the life and ministry of Paul and his associates. A vital principle here is that we must not ignore the fact that our personal lives speak powerfully to the nature of our ministry in the motives, methods, and the means we employ to accomplish the work of God. Our behavior patterns demonstrate the validity and biblical authenticity of what we are doing. And the fact that you and I may be engaged in a lot of works (religious activity) does not in itself prove the quality of our service and its value to the Lord.

So Paul wrote, “For you yourselves know brothers and sisters¹ ... has not proven to be purposeless.” Paul’s enemies had accused him of being a self-seeking peddler of this new message of the gospel, but the Apostle could appeal to their personal knowledge of the character of his ministry like those in the same family. In fact, six times he appealed to their knowledge of his life (1:5; 2:1, 2, 5, 11; 4:2).

His ministry in its manner of life, motives, and methods were above reproach so much so that he could even appeal to the witness of God (2:5). What a contrast to some of the tele-evangelists and to so much of what we see going on in the church of today. But you know, before we go casting stones, we each need to evaluate our own motives, methods, and the means we use as we seek to live our lives before others in the light of the challenges and insights of this great passage. We may not be guilty of the gross fraud of some of those whose names and stories have made the news, but we can be guilty of some of the same type of self-seeking, though on a much smaller and more subtle scale.

Again, as in 1:9, Paul referred to their visit with the Thessalonians by the term *eisodos*, “entrance, a means or place of entering.” Why did he call their coming an entrance? Perhaps because, as one who saw all of life through the perspective of grace and God’s work as the One who leads and directs us, he saw their time there like a door that God had opened giving them an opportunity to minister His Word.

But what did the Apostle mean when he said, “that our coming to you has not proven to be purposeless” or as the NASB translates it, “was not in vain”? “Purposeless,” or “vain” is *keno*, which means “empty, without content, without any basis, without truth or power,” or it could be used in the sense of “without result, effect, or profit, fruitless.” It was used of an empty jar, of sending someone away empty handed, and of empty words.

Paul could be using this word with reference to the results in the lives of the Thessalonians as described in chapter 1 or in reference to the content and character of their preaching and ministry. Since he dealt with the results in the lives of the Thessalonians in chapter 1, and in view of the context that follows here in chapter 2, he is using this word with regard to the essential character, earnestness, and sincerity of their entrance and coming to proclaim God’s truth to the Thessalonians. What follows will set forth Paul’s proof that their coming was full of authentic earnestness and substance. It was not empty and without power or prompted by vain methods, motives, and means.

Verse 2. The first proof their coming and ministry was not empty was the fact they had preached boldly in spite of serious persecution.

“Mistreated” is *hubrizo*, “to abuse, to treat shamefully.” “The word expresses insulting and outrageous treatment and especially treatment which is calculated publicly to insult and openly to humiliate ...”²

“We had the courage” or “boldness ... to speak” (NASB) is *parresiazomai*, “to speak freely, openly, fearlessly, express oneself freely.” In the New Testament this verb is always used with reference to proclaiming the gospel (Acts 9:27, 29; 13:46; 14:3). But because of the animosity that often comes with preaching the gospel, it came to mean “to have courage, venture boldly” but always, it seems, in connection with the word. There are many reasons Christians do not witness or share their faith, but no doubt, fear is the underlying issue—fear of failure, fear of ridicule, fear of hostility, and so on.

Note that the Apostle quickly added the important words, “in our God.” Many are bold for the wrong reasons. This phrase points us to the sphere and reason for their boldness to speak. They were bold and willing to suffer because of their fellowship with the Lord and their confidence of His presence and provision regardless of the opposition.

The nature of their boldness is stressed in the words, “amid much opposition.” “Opposition” is *ago*, from which we get our word *agony*. This word was used of various types of athletic contests. The corresponding verb meant “to contend in the sports,” either running or wrestling. It is used with the verb form in 1 Timothy 6:12 and 2 Timothy 4:7 in the sense of “fighting.” *Ago* suggests intense effort and strenuous exertion in the face of hostility

¹ Literally, “brethren,” the plural of *adelphos*, “brother,” but the plural may be used for “fellow Christians” or “brothers and sisters” in Christ. Again Paul is focusing on their common bond as those born into the family of God.

² Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, edited by Cleon L. Rogers, Regency, Grand Rapids, p. 588.

and conflict. Undoubtedly, by the use of this word, the Apostle had in mind both inward and outward conflict that believers often face in ministry if they are faithful to God's calling and purpose.

For a list of the outward struggles compare 2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 11:23-27. But there were also inward battles perhaps like the temptation to throw in the towel in the face of discouraging conditions. There were the spiritual battles with spiritual opposition, and there was his deep concern for the churches which the Apostle rated right alongside with his physical sufferings (note in particular 1 Cor. 2:3; 2 Cor. 7:5; 11:28).

The point of verse 2 is clear: Men who could sing hymns to God in prison after such insolent and vile treatment for preaching the gospel, but who were still not discouraged from preaching the gospel under such conditions were not likely to be phonies.

The term "opposition" (ago,,n) reminds us that ministry to others, the work of leading people to Christ and helping them grow in Christ, is a contest; it is a spiritual struggle. As such, if we are to be victorious in the struggle, there are certain things we need to keep in mind and commit ourselves to. Let me suggest four:

1. **Earnest effort**—we never win by half trying. The struggle calls for hard work, though never in the energy of our abilities, strategies or methods (1 Cor. 15:10; Col. 1:29–2:1).
2. **Putting off that which hinders, stripping down to the essentials** (Heb. 12:1; 1 Tim. 4:7b-8, 15-16). In our consumer- and comfort-oriented world, this has become a tremendous hindrance.
3. **Singleness of mind, eyes on the goal** (Matt. 6:19-24; Heb. 12:1-3; 1 Pet. 1:13).
4. **Pain—as the saying goes, no pain, no gain.** If we are committed to our comfort and pleasure above the needs of others and God's call, we simply won't be able to follow the Lord. Compare Philippians 1:29-30. Remember, the word "conflict" here is ago,,n. The Apostle pictures the Christian life as a contest, a struggle that demands dedication and great energy.

Actually, chapter 2 is a great chapter to help us establish and maintain biblical priorities. It challenges us to be the people God wants us to be individually and corporately. In this chapter the Apostle gives us a number of priorities that are essential. The first priority is seen in the next point of our outline, **His Message**. This is the priority of **being biblical** in all that we do in our character, methods, and motives, and the means we employ.

Their Motives and Methods—They Were Pure (vss. 3-6)

In their motives and methods, Paul and his team were pure, seeking only to please God and minister in a biblical manner (2:3-6).

These verses show clearly that Paul and his team never ministered for personal gain or self-centered pursuits. They were real, authentic, and operated out of their relationship with Him as they rested in the truth and power of God's Word (cf. vs. 13). These men were so secure in the Lord, they had peeled off all the typical masks and were able to stand vulnerably before God and people. Because they were authentic, free from cover ups, they also never resorted to human schemes or strategies for accomplishing the work of God.

Paul's statement, "although we could have imposed our weight as apostles of Christ," or "though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority" (NASB), or "as apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you" (NIV), carries the idea of "being able to make heavy demands."

First, in this context, "apostles" is used in a rather general sense. It means "as Christ's messengers"³ rather than in the more technical sense of the Twelve and of Paul due to the special revelation given to him.

Second, as those sent out to preach the Word (which is the basic meaning of the word "apostle"), they had the right to be supported by their converts and by others to whom they ministered. This was a right, however, which Paul and his associates chose not to use so that their motives might not be mistaken.

Third, there may also be the issue here that since this team had come with Paul, who was an apostle in the technical sense, they had special authority and powers, but even this, they refused to use. They came as servant leaders, not drivers; as shepherds, not cowboys.

³ F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45., Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 31.

Ronald Enroth, author and professor of sociology at Westmont College, is correct in his analysis of a leader's use of power.

... Bible scholars point out that the New Testament concept of authority as expressed in the Greek word *exousia* does not have the connotation of jurisdiction over the lives of others. Rather, it is the authority of truth, the authority of wisdom and experience which can be evidenced in a leader who is held up as a special example, who can commend himself "to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2).⁴

Concerning their motive and methods, we will see *what the missionaries were not*, the negative; then the positive, *what they were* as it is mingled among the negatives by way of contrasts in verses 3-6.

Verse 3a. Not from "impurity," ek akatharsias. This word could refer to sexual or moral impurity, but here it is more general and means that Paul did not preach from any impure motives like personal ambition, pride, greed, popularity.⁵

Verse 3b. Not "by way of deceit," en dolos. The Greek word dolos referred to a bait or trap and then figuratively of any form of trick or strategy. The preceding deals with a wrong motive, but this deals with a wrong method or strategy used to accomplish the wrong motive. It is helpful to compare Paul's use of the verb form, doloo,, in 2 Corinthians 4:1-2.

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness (panourgia) or adulterating (doloo,,) the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth (what is real, authentic) commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Verse 4a. "But just as we have been approved by God ... , so we declare (speak) it to you." Paul does several things here to focus his readers on what was and must be the motivating factor behind all ministry if it is to honor God and be biblical. First, there is the element of contrast (alla, a strong conjunction of contrast). Second, there is the element of comparison coupled with element of cause. "Just as," kathos, is an intensive comparison which stresses what has occurred as the foundation or cause for what they did. Finally, he shows their ministry, which he defines as a stewardship, was the product of testing.

"Approved" is dokimazo,, and means "to approve after testing." Remember that Paul and Barnabas had been separated to this ministry by the Spirit of God only after they had been tested and proven in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3). They were not novices who just decided they were called to preach. They had been involved in a local ministry which became the proving ground to prove their character.

Verse 4b. "Not to please people, but God." The tense of the infinitive, "to please," which expresses aim, is the present continuous tense. In this we see the constant aim of the Apostle and his associates. Whenever our primary aim is to please men, we lose our capacity to please God. Conversely, only when we seek to please God and speak according to His Word in love, do we truly have the capacity to minister effectively to others. Pleasing people stems from wrong motives such as fear of rejection, desire for approval, power, praise, and so on. Also, pleasing people occurs when we are seeking to meet our needs by our own strategies of protection or defense.

"Who examines our hearts" is one of the keys here. "Examines" is the same verb as "approved" used above. Literally, it is "the one who constantly tests our hearts." God is the heart tester. **He is concerned about our motives and the source of what we do as much as the what itself.** God knows our heart, weighs our motives, and searches us. What a challenge. Our ministries must be considered and examined in the light of God's standards, and not man's and that includes our own. We are all accountable before the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1-5).

Verse 5. "For we never appeared with flattering speech." "Flattering," is *kolakeia*, which contains the idea of deception for selfish ends. People often use flattering words as a cloak to exploit others for selfish purposes. Note a couple of simple illustrations: (a) A supervisor might praise someone on the job to increase their production so his

⁴ Quoted from "Eternity," October 1979, pp. 25-26, by Charles R. Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip, Essentials in an Aimless World*, Word, Waco, 1982, p. 21.

⁵ Rienecker, p. 589.

department will look better. (b) A wife might flatter her husband so he won't be as angry when he finds out about how much she spent on something she purchased.

“Nor with a pretext for greed.” “Pretext” is prophasis, meaning “a cloak, pretense.” It denotes that which one puts on for appearance and with a definite design to cloak or cover up something. “Greed” is pleonexia, “greed, selfishness.” In the New Testament this word always has an evil connotation. It concerns disregarding the rights and needs of others in order to gain one's own selfish desires.

I wonder how many of the problems and heartaches going on in the church are rooted in this problem, the problem of people using ministry of all sorts to promote themselves and meet their own needs and wants whether financial or emotional. It is the problem of hidden agendas.

“God is witness” (see Rom. 1:9; Phil. 1:8). As one who lived in the light of the resurrection (for believers this includes the Judgment Seat of Christ, a place of rewards or loss), Paul was one who always endeavored to have a blameless conscience for he knew that God not only knew his heart, but would one day “bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of *men's* hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God” (cf. Acts 24:15-16 with 1 Cor. 4:5b). Paul has appealed to the Thessalonian's knowledge of him and his team, but they could not judge his inner motives for this lay beyond their ability, so he appeals to God.

Application: Here we have a wonderful illustration of how the knowledge of God should transform us if we really believe God's truth. This again reinforces the truth that Christianity is a relationship with God that is to change us from the inside out. It's the inner person and the life of faith in the reality of the living God that must change us. Otherwise, we are like white-washed sepulchers full of decaying corpses.

Verse 6. “Nor to seek glory from people, either from you or from others ...” “Seek” is a present participle in the Greek text and gets its time element from the main verb of verse 5, “we never came.” We might translate it, “nor were we seeking ...” Paul's choice of the Greek present tense means this was their pattern, their habit of life, something they never did. “Glory” is *doxa* and refers here to an “opinion in the sense of praise, honor, respect.” They were not in the ministry to get their name up in lights or to be patted on the back. Note also how Paul defines the sources, “from (ek) people, either from (apo) you or from (apo) others.” The first is abstract and general forming the foundation for motives, and the second two are concrete and specific, the specific application of the general aim. The change in the prepositions seems to highlight this distinction. As servants of the Savior, we all need to have the general motive of pleasing God and seeking our praise from Him rather than people, but this must be carried out in the specifics of life which have a subtle way of encroaching on our general objectives.

Application: Verse 5 was primarily aimed at financial motives. Verse 6, on the other hand, is aimed at the desire for the praise of people, the lusts for position, praise, applause, power, and the like. Behind this is always the failure to find personal security and significance in the Lord which always results in using our own strategies to feel good about ourselves.

When I was in the pastorate preaching Sunday after Sunday, I generally kept several verses typed out on a card and taped to the podium where I would place my Bible and notes. These verses, like Zechariah 4:6 and this passage were to remind me, as a general principle, of the source of my strength and to check out my motives. I was not to be there for the approbation of people. I can remember on a number of occasions when someone would show up, a visiting pastor, a former Greek professor, or someone else my sinful nature might want to impress, and I was suddenly faced with a very specific need for the application of this passage.

Their Message and Means—They Proclaimed the Word (vss. 2b, 3a, 4a-b, 13).

This missionary team was certainly not without a strategy or methods employed to reach and teach others. As mentioned in the introduction, they would often pass through less populated towns in their objective to reach the bigger cities knowing that if they were successful there, the churches established in these larger populaces could effectively reach out to the smaller towns (cf. 1:6-9). But this was not what they depended on for success or what defined and characterized their ministry and made it fruitful and vital. At the heart of all they were, believed in, and did, was the authoritative, true, and tried revelation of God, the gospel, the Word of God. It is quite obvious that their confidence, beginning in 1:5, was centered in this life-changing revelation which Paul defines as the gospel (1:5; 2:3-5) and “the word of God” or “God's message” (2:13).

The reason for this is seen in the words, “approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel” (vs. 4). Paul and his team viewed the gospel as a treasure entrusted to them for safe keeping and for investment in the lives of others. In several other places, the Apostle spoke of the gospel as a stewardship entrusted to him (see 1 Cor. 9:17 and cf. Gal. 2:7; 1 Tim. 1:11; Tit. 1:3). “Entrusted” is *pisteuo*, which means “to believe, trust” in someone or something. But one may also trust someone with something valuable and so *pisteuo*, came to mean, “entrust” or in the passive as here, “be entrusted” with something and that something is “the gospel.” Several ideas of importance come from this:

1. An essential qualification for service is that we be trustworthy (see 1 Cor. 4:2). But we need to remember that it is the grace of God that enables us to be and remain trustworthy (1 Cor. 7:25; 15:10-11; 1 Tim. 1:16).
2. Paul and his associates had not taken on this ministry of their own choosing. Rather they were chosen of God and were thereby responsible to Him for their ministry because it was a stewardship from God (1 Cor. 9:17).
3. Underlying all of this is the principle of great value. There is something of tremendous value to be entrusted. Paul brings out this element in 1 Timothy 1:11 when he says, “according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.”

The Bible, because it is God’s Word, is the most valuable resource we can possess, but it must be used and used wisely. Truly, it is more valuable than gold (see also Ps. 19:7-11).

So, keeping the context in mind, we must remember that the aim of these verses is to demonstrate their entrance was not in vain, not without spiritual character (vs. 1), and to prove that he not only assures them of the purity of the motives of the missionaries, but also assures them of the nature of the message as from God and thus, as pure and without error. The chief thing to know about Christianity is that its message is from God. It tells us things about God and salvation that man cannot know apart from the Bible, this special revelation from God. Knowing the nature of their message and knowing the emptiness of what the world possessed in its various false belief systems, Paul assured them of the message they brought.

Verses 2-3. So, in these two verses Paul makes reference to “the gospel of God” and to their “appeal” or “exhortation” (NASB). He is concerned not only that the people understand their motives were pure, but so was the message they heralded.

“For the appeal we make does not come from error or impurity or with deceit.” “Appeal” is the Greek *parakaleo*, “encouragement, exhortation, appeal, request.” Paul chose this term because he was speaking in general terms about the nature of the preaching of God’s message. The missionary team appealed to people to believe in God’s plan of salvation in the person and work of the Savior (see Paul’s use of the verb form, *parakaleo*, in 2 Cor 5:20). Concerning this message, he assures them of several things.

Paul assured them their message, the gospel of God, “does not come from error.” “Error” is *planeo*, which is literally, “a wandering, roaming.” In the New Testament it is used figuratively of “wandering from the truth, error, deception, delusion, etc.” It particularly looks at the empty ideas and ideologies as the wanderings of men’s hearts who do not have the knowledge of God’s special revelation as found in the Scripture. Paul uses it in Romans 1:27 in relation to the sexual perversion of homosexuality. So here, he assures them, their message was not the product of man’s empty wanderings.

Application: Concerning the world in which the church was born, a world far too much like the one in which we live today, Tenney has an excellent description that I think is helpful here.

The Christian church was born into a world filled with competing religions which may have differed widely among themselves but all of which possessed one common characteristic—the struggle to reach a god or gods who remained essentially inaccessible. Apart from Judaism, which taught that God had voluntarily disclosed Himself to the patriarchs, to Moses, and to the prophets, there was no faith that could speak with certainty of divine revelation nor of any true concept of sin and salvation. The current ethical standards were superficial, despite the ideal and insights possessed by some philosophers, and when they discourse on evil and on virtue, they had neither the remedy for the one nor the dynamic to produce the other.

Even in Judaism revealed truth had been obscured either by the encrustation of traditions or by neglect ...

Paganism and all religions apart from knowledge and faith in God's Word always produces a parody and a perversion of God's original revelation to man. It retains many basic elements of truth but twists them into practical falsehood. Divine sovereignty becomes fatalism; grace becomes indulgence; righteousness becomes conformity to arbitrary rules; worship becomes empty ritual; prayer becomes selfish begging; the supernatural degenerates into superstition. The light of God is clouded by fanciful legend and by downright falsehood. The consequent confusion of beliefs and of values left men wandering in a maze of uncertainties. To some, expediency became the dominating philosophy of life; for if there can be no ultimate certainty, there can be no permanent principles by which to guide conduct; and if there are no permanent principles, one must live as well as he can by the advantage of the moment. Skepticism prevailed, for the old gods had lost their power and no new gods had appeared. Numerous novel cults invaded the empire from every quarter and became the fads of the dilettante rich or the refuge of the desperate poor. Men had largely lost the sense of joy and of destiny that made human life worthwhile.⁶

The Christian church is the custodian of the glorious message of the inspired, inerrant Word of God, the truth, that sets men free and sets them apart for God (John 8:32; 17:17), but unfortunately, even the evangelical church has turned away from the Word of God as its central thrust and focus. It has adopted methods that no longer truly maintain a concern for truth or for a theology that is rooted in God's Word. Two things are going on at once in the church today that are undermining the authority of the Bible: a failure to recognize or act on (1) the sufficiency of the Bible as God's inspired Word (2 Tim. 2:14-17) and (2) the finality of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the "power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). These are being lost in attempts to be politically correct, to be relevant for a society bent on self-centered pursuits, to be popular with the world or avoid criticism, to entertain, and to provide a feel good, emotionally-oriented kind of church. In describing the kind of thing happening to the church, John H. Armstrong discusses the importance of *sola Scriptura*, Scripture only, in the introduction to an excellent book called, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*. In it he writes:

It is the opinion of the contributors to this volume that a number of new authorities threaten modern evangelicalism directly. These authorities are often grounded in what the above confession calls "custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments ... or visions, or miracles," and they must be challenged when they stand against the authority of the Word and Gospel of Christ.⁷

Theology is the knowledge of God in both salvation and sanctification, but there can be no true knowledge of God apart from sound Bible teaching/preaching. A recent survey in *Christianity Today* revealed that the importance of theology by many evangelicals is more a matter of lip service than anything else.

... According to this survey (which, by the way, was attached to the leading story of the issue), theology, in *any* sense of the word, is really *not* all that important to the very people to whom it should matter most; those in the pew and in the pulpit. Both groups listed theological knowledge as *last* in terms of pastoral priorities.

It was interesting, and at the same time very disturbing, to note what each surveyed group considered more important than theology when it came to pastoral priorities. For the people in the pew, *spirituality* was of first importance, followed by relational skills, character, and then communication skills. It is difficult to decipher what is really meant by *spirituality* in this survey, since the respondents so distantly removed it from theological knowledge ...

How can true spirituality be divorced from the knowledge of God (theology)? "There can be no vital spirituality," writes Donald Bloesch, "without a sound theology." (*Crumbling Foundations: Death & Rebirth in an Age of Upheaval*, Grand Rapids, Academic Books, 1984, p. 111.)⁸

⁶ Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Times*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1965, pp. 107-108.

⁷ John H. Armstrong, General Editor, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, Moody, Chicago, 1996, p. 19.

⁸ Armstrong, pp. 58-59.

They Served as Loving Parents (2:7-12)

2:7 although we could have imposed our weight as apostles of Christ. But we were little children among you—like a nursing mother caring for her own children. **2:8** With such affection for you, we were happy to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. **2:9** For you recall, brothers and sisters, our toil and drudgery: by working night and day so as not to impose a burden on any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. **2:10** You are witnesses, and God too, how holy and righteous and blameless our conduct was toward you who believe. **2:11** As you know, we treated each one of you as a father treats his own children, **2:12** exhorting and encouraging you and insisting that you live in a way worthy of God who calls you to his own kingdom and his glory.

In the preceding section the Apostle compared their ministry with that of a faithful steward. There he categorically denied the false accusations in a seven-fold denial: they were guilty of neither error, nor impurity, nor deceit, nor flattery, nor greed, nor seeking the glory of men. The chief emphasis as stewards was on their faithfulness and authenticity.

Now in the section before us the Apostle uses two new figures to describe their ministry: a loving mother and a concerned father. Here the emphasis is first on gentleness and willingness, and then on fatherly instruction backed up by godly example. The lessons here for ministry, whether in the church or in the home, are powerful and desperately needed today.

Also note how we might look at verses 1-13:

Ministry in selflessness (vss. 5-6a)	Ministry in holiness (vs. 10)
Ministry with gentleness (vss. 6b-7)	Ministry with admonition (vs. 11)
Ministry with willingness (vs. 8)	Ministry with God's mission (vs. 12)
Ministry without heaviness (vs. 9)	Ministry centered in Bible exposition (vss. 1-4, 13)

Like Loving Mothers (vss. 7-8)

With the Gentleness of a Nursing Mother (vs. 7)

F. F. Bruce has written of the ministry of Paul and his associates:

By secular standards, they were marked to the end of their days by poverty, weakness, disrepute and all sorts of tribulation; but they assessed their lot by other than secular standards—"as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6:10).

But more impressive than their disclaimer of unworthy motives and actions is the assertion of their loving care for their converts. The note of maternal affection in v 7 comes from the heart of Paul. Far from seeking any material help from their converts, they were eager to share with them all that they had, and indeed all that they were. No other attitude would befit the preachers of a gospel which proclaimed as Lord and Savior one who "emptied himself" (Phil 2:7) for the enrichment of others.⁹

"But we were." The verb here is ginomai, "to come to be, become," or "be" as with eimi. Either he was simply stating what they were or what they purposefully became for the sake of their ministry. I am inclined to the latter, particularly in view of verse 12.

"Little children among you." The NASB, KJV, and NIV have "gentle among you." There is a manuscript variation here between two Greek words, e,pioti, "gentle," and ne,pioti, "infants, children," which are very similar. The NET Bible has chosen the ne,pioti reading which, though more difficult contextually, has stronger MSS support. For the reasons, see the footnote to this reading in the NET Bible.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 33.

“Gentle” (e,,prios) was used of the kindness of parents toward children (cf. 2 Tim. 2:24). It stands as a fitting contrast to being a burden and asserting their apostolic authority (vs. 6b). “Children” (ne,,pioi) would still stress a non-threatening presence, which still fits with those who refused to be a burden. The sense is really not affected.

“Among you” brings out another important aspect, the principle of parity. They were in their midst as equals. There was no sense of superiority nor any attempt to lord it over their converts (1 Pet. 5:3).

Apostles though they were, they had identified themselves with those who accepted their message, cp. 1 Pet. 5:1, 2, as helpers of their joy, 2 Cor. 1:24, and had become “their servants for Jesus’ sake,” 4:5, and according to His command, Matt. 23:8-12, cp. Luke 22:27.¹⁰

“Like a nursing mother caring for her own children.” “Nursing mother” is trophos, “a nurse, one who feeds, wet nurse,” or, as the following words suggest, “a nursing mother.” “Tenderly cares” is thalpo,, “to warm, cherish, nourish.” It was used of birds covering their young or her eggs with their feathers (Deut. 22:6), and of Christ and His care for the church (Eph. 5:29). “For her own children” would stress the personal involvement and concern. A mother who is nursing her children does not and cannot turn the care of her child over to someone else. She feeds, loves, and protects her child.

With the Affection and Sacrifice of a Nursing Mother (vs. 8)

The clause, “with such affection for you,” becomes the basis of the following statement regarding the nature and character of Paul’s commitment to these believers. “Affection” is homeiromai, “to have a kindly feeling, to long for someone.” This is a rare word and refers to a mother’s strong affection for her child. “It is used on a grave inscription describing the parents’ sad yearning for their dead child and seems to indicate deep affection and great attraction.”¹¹

“We were happy” is eudokeo,, “to be gladly determined.” It denotes not merely pleasure in some action, but free and deliberate choice. Further, the tense is present and expresses not just a mere impulse, but a determination made and adhered to out of their deep commitment to the Lord and their daily relationship with the Savior.

“To share with you ...” “Share” is *metadidomi*, and expresses “the giving of something by which the giver retains a part and the receiver has a part so that they both share in the matter.”¹² (cf. Rom. 1:11-12).

“Not only ..., but also our own lives,” sets forth a vital principle. Too often we are willing enough to give out the Word or our opinions on the Word, but we aren’t willing to give of ourselves. To give the gospel without the willingness to give of ourselves to others as we are able is a contradiction because the gospel is a message about the giving of God’s Son and His giving of His own life for us (1 John 4).

“Because you had become dear to us” highlights the reason. “Dear” is agapeto,,s, a verbal adjective which means “beloved.” The tense of “become” is a culminative aorist and suggest a result. The idea is that laboring among them was first caused by the constraining love of Christ and His call on their lives (2 Cor. 5:14), but time among the people had built relationships which had produced a deep affection for these converts.

Application:

1. New babes in Christ require personal care, protection, and nourishing on the milk of the Word.
2. As a nursing child can become ill through a reaction to something the mother has eaten, so older believers who are feeding others, must be careful what they themselves eat. In other words, our lives have a good or a bad effect on younger believers. If we are feeding on the husks of the world rather than on the Savior’s Word, we are going to make our children sickly (cf. 1 Tim. 4:6-16).
3. A nursing mother imparts her own life to her child. This is the point of vs. 8. Christian pediatrics requires some sacrifices.

¹⁰ C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians with Notes Exegetical and Expository*, Pickering and Inglis, London, 1914, p. 60).

¹¹ Rienecker, p. 590.

¹² Rienecker, p. 590.

4. Giving out the gospel and building people in the Lord requires building bridges and relationships through which people can see the love of Christ and experience it first hand. This is why small groups can be effective if they are also committed to really studying the Word. Evangelism statistics indicate that the majority of people who stick in a church, grow, and become reproducing Christians are those who have developed close relationships.
5. Helping people to grow in the Lord, as with growing children, takes time and requires patience. Sometimes it causes pain and priorities need to be set in our relationships. You don't raise children overnight. You can't raise them without growing pains for both parent and child alike, and we can't impact them for Christ without spending quality time to see them built up in Christ.

Verse 9 could well go with either the maternal or the paternal analogy. The “for” connects it to the preceding as an explanation of their commitment to these believers. But because of the emphasis on working to support themselves, and because he immediately takes up the figure of the father, I have linked it to the father analogy.

Like Concerned Fathers (vss. 9-12)

These verses portray the ministry of the missionary team from the standpoint or analogy of a father. Let's view this through the following outline.

- The Effort of Their Ministry—Their Work (vs. 9)
- The Excellency of Their Character—Their Walk (vs. 10)
- The Exhortation of Their Lips—Their Words (vs. 11)
- The Effects They Desired—Their Wants (vs. 12)

The Effort of Their Ministry—Their Work (vs. 9)

Paul's accusers had accused him and his partners in ministry of greed saying they were mere peddlers of some new teaching for the purpose of financial gain. So the Apostle reminds them of the facts which they well knew. Also, remember there is a general biblical principle that a father works to support his family. Though the church at Philippi had sent some financial help, Paul, who was a tentmaker, worked to pay for his own needs. Since there were no paid teachers in Palestine, it was necessary that a rabbi learn a trade to support himself and his family. Paul had done just this.

According to the Lord's teaching and Paul's, ministers of the gospel had the right to be supported for their work in preaching and teaching, but Paul had forfeited that right when planting new ministries. The following are a few of some possible reasons: (a) As a protection against the wrong impressions and false accusations of being religious peddlers. (b) We can't expect people to support a work before they had become converts and had learned the grace principles of proportionate giving. (c) To give the new work time to get on its feet. Remember, later they did receive gifts from the Macedonian believers.

The Excellency of Their Character—Their Walk (vs. 10)

First, since true godliness involves both the outward, what men see, and the inward, what God alone can see, Paul appeals to both: to what they had observed and to the witness of God. Sometimes we can fool people, but we can never fool the Lord. The Apostle was ever mindful that he was accountable to the Lord for his life and ministry (cf. Heb. 13:17).

Second, he referred to their behavior as “holy and righteous and blameless.”

“Holy” is *hosios*, which describes one's duty toward God or the godward aspect of one's behavior,¹³ though this distinction did not always hold. This word was sometimes used of one's relationship with both God and men. It would stress one's commitment to the spiritual disciplines of prayer and studying the Word, to worship, to loving the Lord, and acting properly toward others.

“Righteous” is *dikaios*, which stresses one's relationship to men in a manner consistent with the directives of the Word—honesty, truthfulness, purity, goodness, charity or acts of love, etc.

¹³ Reinecker, p. 591.

“Blameless” is *amemptos*, which means free from charges or blame. Not faultless in the sense of sinless, but free from blame. Though he and his partners had been accused of wrong doing, the charges were all false.

Third, the clause “our conduct toward you who believe” reminds us of one of the most important principles of effective ministry whether in the home, in the church or on the job; it’s the principle of being an example. We can’t motivate or communicate to others what we don’t have ourselves (cf. John 13:14; Phil. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9; 1 Tim. 1:16; 4:12; Tit. 2:7; 1 Pet. 5:3).

The Exhortation of Their Lips—Their Words (vs. 11)

Again notice Paul’s threefold emphasis. Is this just a fondness for threesomes? No! In raising children and in building people in the Lord, our words must of necessity take on a variety of tones—exhorting, encouraging, and imploring them as a father. But before we look at these words, let’s note two things:

First, note the emphasis of “each one.” While he taught and dealt with them as a group, he also dealt with them as individuals. Like a father with his children, he found time for personal counsel and to develop personal relationships. In large churches, even a large staff can’t logistically accomplish this, but this personal element is important and Paul will later encourage this church to be engaged in this very kind of personal ministry (see 5:11).

Second, it is helpful to note the use of the present continuous tense with all three of these words, *training, teaching, insisting*, requires repetition.

“Exhorting” is *parakaleo*,. This important New Testament word has both a prospective appeal, in the sense of “obey, respond,” and a retrospective appeal in the sense of “comfort, encourage.” Children need both encouraging and challenging. The emphasis here is on the former idea because of the synonym which follows. This word means “to exhort to a particular line of conduct.”¹⁴

“Encouraging” is *paramutheomai*, “encourage, cheer up, console.” Whereas the preceding word stressed following a particular line of behavior, this word means “to encourage to continue on a specific course.”¹⁵ It works to promote endurance and staying power. A father might challenge and exhort his son to make good grades in school (*parakaleo*), but he might also encourage him to stay in school, to stay the course (*paramutheomai*).

“Imploring” is *marturomai* from *martus*, “witness.” It means “summon to witness,” “to bear witness,” and then “to solemnly charge, adjure, beseech.” In view of the aim stated in verse 12, the emphasis here is on a solemn charge though it could also contain an element of personal witness as a motive for following the charge. This word has more of an authoritative emphasis than the two preceding words.

The Effects They Desired—Their Wants (vs. 12)

“That” expresses the aim¹⁶ of the missionaries. The nature of their motherly and fatherly ministry to these believers was God centered and other oriented. How often do we witness, exhort, and minister for the wrong reasons—our reputation, our ego, our comfort, our growth as a church—rather than for God’s glory and the spiritual blessing of others. The precise aim is expressed in the words, “That you may walk in a way worthy of God.” This reminds us of our need as a church to have biblical goals and objectives, but also that what we do as a church and individuals should be designed to accomplish these biblical goals. We are not here just to do religious things.

“Walk” is *peripateo*,, which means to walk about and is used metaphorically of one’s course of life in all areas. This brings to mind what I have referred to as the pentathlon, the five key areas of life—God, home, church, vocation, and society with all its various breakdowns—neighbors, government, the poor, etc.

“Walking about in all spheres of life in a way worthy of God” calls to mind a couple of things. (1) It drives home the principal that the Lord must be brought into everything we do since we are servants and ambassadors of His kingdom and rule. Whatever we do should be done to glorify Him. (2) But we can never actually be worthy of His kingdom. “Worthy” is an adverb and points to the manner in which we walk. We have been qualified to be a part

¹⁴ Reinecker, p. 591.

¹⁵ Reinecker, p. 591.

¹⁶ *Eis* to plus the infinitive *peripatein* may express purpose or result. The context here favors purpose.

of His kingdom by grace through the finished work of the Savior. However, we can walk and conduct ourselves in a way that will honor Him and that is in keeping with His character and purposes.

“Who calls you into His own kingdom and glory” expresses the reason and motive.

“Who calls you” is a present tense. Not Who *has called* you, but Who *calls* you. It points to a continuous work of God through the ministry of the church using the Word and walking by the Spirit. God, who had called them to salvation, a finished transaction (cf. 2 Thess. 2:13-14), is still calling believers to His kingdom and glory, i.e., to a continued pursuit of a life of obedience and holiness under the rule of God, one that will result in rewards in the kingdom and glory. Entrance into heaven is assured, but rewards and position there are the result of faithful living (2 Tim. 2:11-13; 2 Pet. 1:9-11).

Finally, note the phrase, “His own kingdom and glory.” This strongly reminds us that there are other kingdoms and other kinds of glory that are competing for our allegiance and that of our spiritual children. So we must not only be alert to these false influences but take precautions to guard against their influences on our spiritual children in Christ. In the latter part of this chapter and the next, we will see the Apostle's deep concern for this very thing.

Conclusion

In chapter 1 we saw a model church and now in verses 1-12 we have seen a model for ministry on all levels whether elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers, leaders of small groups, or whatever. These verses provide a wonderful illustration for what we can refer to as ‘pediatrics,’ the follow up needed to see believers grow and become stable productive Christians. In this regard, we each need to be faithful stewards, loving mothers, and concerned and involved fathers. At the heart of this is our faithfulness to God and His precious Word, our training manual. If we are not faithful we will find ourselves pampering mothers or absentee fathers who wonder why our babes in Christ never grew up but instead became prodigal children in pursuit of the world rather than God’s kingdom and glory.

Lesson 5: The Commendation and Thanksgiving (1 Thess. 2:13-20)

Introduction

The next section, 2:13-20, continues to express the loving concern of Paul and his associates, especially in view of their welcome of God's Word and in view of the persecution they were facing. In 2:13-16, Paul again thanks God for these Thessalonian believers, but it is not just another thanksgiving, nor a repeat, nor a continuation of 1:2-10. It is more of an amplification of those previous verses. In 1:2-10 we saw the **effect**, an example to other churches, but here we see the **cause**, their reception and response to the message of the Apostle as the Word of God, or their appreciation, appropriation, and application of Paul's message as the Word of God. It is this response to the message which led to their ability to become what they became and to endure their sufferings.

Paul then expresses his fervent hope to return, mentions the hindrances against his returning, and gives the reason for his concern and desire to return (2:17-20).

Verses 13-20 touch on four important topics or areas of biblical truth: the Bible (vs. 13), suffering (vss. 14-16), the spiritual warfare we are in (vss. 17-18), and rewards (vss. 19-20).

At the heart of verse 13 is the nature and character of the Bible as the living Word of God. "The apostle does not state merely that the converts had esteemed the message to be from God, he asserts that it is so. No person or society can by its sanction add weight to the word of God, the authority of which is inherent."¹ Without this book as the Word of God, we have no real message and we are left to the ever changing ideas of men and human reasoning. It's just one man's opinion against another or someone's use of statistics that are often misrepresented and distorted in favor of his or her cause and selfish interests.

Their *Reception* of the Word (2:13)

2:13 And so we too constantly thank God that when you received God's message that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human message, but as it truly is, God's message, that is at work among you who believe.

An Explanation of the Text—What Does It Say?

Literally, the Greek text reads, "And for this reason we also." According to the context, the Greek construction (*dia touto*) may look backward or forward, but here the context shows it looks forward to what follows, i.e., to Paul's thanksgiving for the Thessalonians. This is because the following clause is introduced with "that" (*oti*) which either gives the content of his thanks or the reason. His thankfulness concerns their response to the message as God's Word, which, of course, it really is.

"We too" (*kai humeis*), can mean (1) that here is another reason for their thanksgiving, or (2) we also as well as you. Timothy had just returned and probably with the message of the converts' thankfulness for their salvation. So Paul adds that they too were thankful, but especially for the way they had responded to the message.

"Constantly thank God" is literally "we are giving thanks to God without ceasing." *Adialeipto*, is an adverb which means "without interruption, continually, regularly." It is used in Romans 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:13; and 5:17. In each passage it has to do with some aspect of prayer.

"That" is *oti* which is best taken as "because," introducing the reason for the preceding statement (cf. 1:5).

¹ C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians with Notes Exegetical and Expository*, Pickering and Inglis, London, 1914, p. 72.

Paul uses two words for receiving the Word: “receive” and “accepted.” “Received” is *paralambano*, which means “to receive from another,” but it is especially used in the New Testament of receiving a message or body of instruction or doctrine (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:1, 3; Gal. 1:9, 12 [2 times], Col. 2:6; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:1; 2 Thess. 3:6). This word stresses the fact the message was delivered to them and they heard it with their own ears in a teaching environment.

“God’s message that you heard from us” is literally, “the word of hearing (the word which you heard) from us, the one of God (i.e., which is really from God).” The Greek construction lays great stress on the nature of the message as being God’s message, not man’s.

“You accepted” is *dechomai*, which means to receive in the sense of “welcome.” The first word, *Paralambano*, means the message was delivered to them. The second word, *dechomai*, means they welcomed it. The first refers to “the hearing of the ear” while the second refers to “the hearing of the heart.” But just how did they welcome the message? This is stated negatively first, perhaps for emphasis, and then positively.

“Not as a human message” draws our attention to what the Bible and the gospel is not. It is not a man-made message. The Apostle often faced those who dismissed the preaching of the Word as merely a message devised by men and thus without authority and without the power to save and transform lives. But such is not the case with the Bible, Genesis to Revelation as we have it today. It is not such a book that man would write if he could and could write if he would. Paul strongly affirmed this about his message in Galatians 1:11-12, “the gospel which was preached by me ... is not according to man; for I did not receive it from man nor was I taught it (by man).” The Apostle Peter likewise affirmed this truth with regard to the whole of Scripture in 2 Peter.

2 Peter 1:20-21. Above all, you do well if you recognize this: no prophecy of scripture ever comes about by the prophet’s own imagination, **1:21** for no prophecy was ever borne of human impulse; rather, men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

The true character of the message is stated, “but as it truly is, God’s message” or as the NASB, “For what it really is, the word of God.” “But” is *alla*, a conjunction of strong contrast which strongly contrasts this statement with the preceding. It helps to stress the true nature of Paul’s message or of what men actually do when they preach and teach the Bible—they are preaching God’s Word, not man’s. “Truly” or “really” is *alethos*, which stands for truth as distinguished from falsehood. It means true to fact and denotes the actuality of the thing.² This focuses us on the true origin and nature of the Word of God. It is God’s inspired, inerrant Word.

Application: Of course, this is really only true when men properly study and preach the Bible. Without this, we end up preaching what is in reality man’s opinion and heresy. For this reason, Paul exhorted Timothy to “Make every effort to present yourself before God as a proven worker who does not need to be ashamed, teaching the message of truth accurately” (2 Tim. 2:15). *Accurately* or as the NASB translates, “*handling accurately*” is a figurative translation of the Greek word, *orthotomeo*, which means “to cut straight.” In regard to the message of truth, it means “correctly handling” or “imparting it without deviation.” This verb is used in Proverbs 3:6 and 11:5 with the noun *hodos* (fem. pl. acc. of *hodos*) and clearly means “to cut a path in a straight direction” or “cut a road across country (that is forested or otherwise difficult to pass through) in a straight direction,” so that the traveler may go directly to his destination.³ As a maker of tents, Paul may have had in mind accurately cutting the tent material. This verse becomes even more significant when seen in the light of its context of the empty chatter of men (see 2 Tim. 2:14, 16-17). An important reality is that the higher our view of the Bible, the more painstaking and conscientious our study of it must be. As Stott comments, “If this book is indeed the Word of God, then away with slovenly, slipshod exegesis! We have to make time to penetrate the text until it yields up its treasures. Only when we have ourselves absorbed its message, can we confidently share it with others.”⁴ Of course, it is not just a matter of time, but of skill in the art of exegesis using a sound hermeneutic so we are studying Scripture using the grammatical, lexical, cultural, historical approach.

² G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, T. & T. Clark, 1973, p. 20.

³ Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds, The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982, p. 182.

“That is at work among you who believe” or as the NASB, “which also performs its work in you who believe.” “Performs its work” is *energeo*, from which we get our word energy or energize. This word means “to work effectually, to work efficiently and productively.”⁵ Paul’s choice of the present continuous tense points to that which is consistently true as a principle of life. When we receive God’s Word (through personal study or in a teaching environment) and welcome it by faith, it brings the power of God to bear on our lives. And this is not just a matter of the power of positive thinking, but the product of the miraculous work of the Spirit of God using the Word of God (1:5).

“Among you who believe” is a present active adjectival participle and describes the Thessalonians as believers. It is equivalent to the words “you believers.” Scripture is the cause of faith (Rom. 10:17), and the means of life (Rom. 1:16), and transformed living (Rom. 12:2), but faith is the means by which we appropriate it. They were not just believers in Christ, but those characterized by welcoming and believing in the Word. This also stresses that Paul and his missionary team were those who were men of the Word.

With this clause, the Apostle makes a strong contrast between the mere words of man and the power of the gospel (cf. 1:5). “The word of human beings, however wise in substance or eloquent in expression, cannot produce spiritual life; this is the prerogative of the word of God, which works effectually (*energeitai*) in believers.”⁶

Now, let’s look at this verse from the standpoint of its teaching on the Bible, integrate that with other portions of Scripture, and see what that means to us.

An Application of the Text—What Does It Mean?

The Nature of the Bible

Its Attributes—What it is to us

Negatively, what it is not. This is seen in the words “not as the word of men.” The Bible is emphatically not just the word of men. Men were merely the human instruments for transmission of the message of God, but God Himself was the author.

Positively, what it is: This is brought out emphatically in two ways in this verse.

First, in relation to the preachers, the uniqueness of their message is brought out by the words “you received from us the word of God’s message.” The preachers were aware of the fact that the message they were proclaiming was not their message. It was really the word of God as we saw in the explanation above.

Second, in relation to the hearers, the uniqueness of their message is brought out by the words, “but for what it really is, the word of God.”

Three concepts and three passages reinforce and develop the concepts of 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

(1) The **fact** of the inspiration is brought out in 2 Timothy 3:16. This passage states that all Scripture is inspired and profitable. In the process of this statement three important claims are made.

- **All Scripture**, the entire Bible, is inspired and profitable. In this we see the **extent** of inspiration. Inspiration includes all of the Bible down to its very words.
- The entire Bible is God-breathed. This declares the **means** of inspiration; Scripture is the result of the very out breathing of God.
- The entire Bible is **profitable**. In this we see the purpose of inspiration which is further elaborated on verses 16b and 17.

The how of inspiration is both negatively and positively declared in 2 Peter 1:20-21. To understand this, compare Acts 27:15. “Be driven along” refers to the wind in the sail of the ship which carried it along under the control

⁵ Fritz Rienecker, edited by Cleon L. Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Regency, Grand Rapids, p. 592.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 45.

of the wind. This is the same word used in 2 Peter 1:21. This is the Greek word *pheromenoi*, a present passive participle of *phero*,, “to bring, carry.”

In the same manner as that ship was driven, directed, or carried about by the wind, God directed and moved the human writers He used to produce the books of the Bible. Though the wind was the strong force that moved the ship along, the sailors were not asleep and inactive. Similarly, the Holy Spirit was the guiding force that directed the writers who, nevertheless, played their own active roles in writing the Scriptures.

But this verse also makes another important point. It declares that the wills of the human authors did not direct the writing of the Bible. The same verb, “moved” or “borne,” appears in the latter part of the verse as well. Thus prophecy was not borne by the will of man. The Spirit did it, not the will of man. This statement bears in an important way on the question of the inerrancy of the Bible. Man’s will, including his will to make mistakes, did not bring the Scriptures; rather, the Holy Spirit, who cannot err, brought us the Scriptures. To be sure, the writers were active in writing, but what they wrote was directed, not by their own wills with the possibility of error, but by the Spirit who is true and infallible.⁷

(2) The nature of the Bible as holy, pure, and free from error.

Ryrie has this important word regarding a true biblical concept of the nature of the inspiration of the Bible:

While many theological viewpoints would be willing to say the Bible is inspired, one finds little uniformity as to what is meant by inspiration. Some focus it on the writers; others, on the writings; still others, on the readers. Some relate it to the general message of the Bible; others, to the thoughts; still others, to the words. Some include inerrancy; many don’t.

These differences call for precision in stating the biblical doctrine. Formerly all that was necessary to affirm one’s belief in full inspiration was the statement, “I believe in the inspiration of the Bible.” But when some did not extend inspiration to the words of the text it became necessary to say, “I believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible.” To counter the teaching that not all parts of the Bible were inspired, one had to say, “I believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible.” Then because some did not want to ascribe total accuracy to the Bible, it was necessary to say, “I believe in the verbal, plenary, infallible, inerrant inspiration of the Bible.” But then “infallible” and “inerrant” began to be limited to matters of faith only rather than also embracing all that the Bible records (including historical facts, genealogies, accounts of Creation, etc.), so it became necessary to add the concept of “unlimited inerrancy.” Each addition to the basic statement arose because of an erroneous teaching.⁸

Its Actions or Activity—What it does in us

This is seen in the words “that is at work among you who believe.” As mentioned previously, “at work” is *energeo*, from which we get our word energy or energize and means “to work efficiently and productively.” It is in the present continuous tense of what is consistently true as a principle of life. Here is one of the many witnesses of the Bible to itself.

Some passages that witness to the powerful activity of the Bible are:

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16).

12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, p. 69.

⁸ Ryrie, p. 67.

25 My soul cleaves to the dust; Revive me according to Thy word. ... 28 My soul weeps because of grief; Strengthen me according to Thy word (Psalm 119:25, 28).

107 I am exceedingly afflicted; Revive me, O LORD, according to Thy word (Psalm 119:107).

149 Hear my voice according to Thy lovingkindness; Revive me, O LORD, according to Thine ordinances (Psalm 119:149).

154 Plead my cause and redeem me; Revive me according to Thy word (Psalm 119:154).

159 Consider how I love Thy precepts; Revive me, O LORD, according to Thy lovingkindness (Psalm 119:159).

In these verses of Psalm 119, the hope of strength, revival, endurance, etc., is found in the life giving Word of God. It is seen by the Psalmist as both the standard for our character and the means of change and revival.

Scripture is full of what we might call word pictures or snapshots which depict both the attributes and the actions of the Word or what the Bible is to man. For a detailed study of these beautiful word pictures and what they tell us about Scripture see ABCs for Christian Growth, Part 2, Lesson 6: The Word-Filled Life in the Spiritual Life section on our web site at www.bible.org.

The Need and Responsibility of People

God's revelation always demands an adequate response. If God has spoken, and He has in creation or nature, in revelation or Scripture, and in the person of His Son, we need a response that is in keeping with the nature of the Bible as God's Word to man. As this pertains to the church, we will look at this from the standpoint of those given charge over the church as servant leaders and of those who are in the church.

The Need of Pastors or Teachers of the Word

(1) They are to carefully study and proclaim the Word. In this regard, several things are vital and needed:

The Principle of Priority (cf. Acts 6:1-6; 1 Cor. 2:1f.; 2 Tim. 4:1-4; Ps. 138:2) While the church has other critical responsibilities, nothing is more important than the proclamation of the Word. Why? Because it is so fundamental to everything else from the standpoint of truth versus error, authority, direction, motivation, and life itself. Christ is the foundation of the church, but what we believe about Jesus Christ comes from the Word. In essence then, knowing the Word is foundational to everything else.

Our number one priority then is the Word, not social reform or social ministries, not fund raising, not programs, and not administration. We do have responsibilities in these other areas, but not at the expense of effective communication of the Word. Bible teaching is the root while these other things stand as outgrowths, the trunk, branches, and fruit.

The Principle of Careful Preparation (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Rom. 12:6-7; 2 Tim. 2:15). There are three elements involved in preparation: (a) one's spiritual gift, (b) personal study and training, and (c) experience and skill or maturity.

The Principle of Faithful Proclamation (Col. 1:28; 2 Tim. 4:2; 1 Cor. 2:1f.). Because of the nature of the Bible and its priority, there needs to be adequate opportunity for its proclamation to the flock. What I see happening today is that the teaching of Scripture is being bumped and replaced by other interests and concerns. As a result, an astounding number of people in the body of Christ are biblical and doctrinal illiterates. The principle here is simply that 'sermonettes' produce 'Christianettes.'

The Principle of Pattern or Modeling Christ (1 Tim. 4:11-13; Heb. 13:7). This principle and need was discussed in verses 1-12, but it involves the truth of being a model of Christ-likeness to others.

(2) They are to pray for its progress (cf. 2 Thess. 3:1-2 with 1 Cor. 3:6-7; Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3-4)

This is the grace perspective: regardless of our giftedness, preparation in the study, and skill, without the blessing of the Lord and His hindrance of the work of Satan, our preaching or teaching will fall flat and fail. We face tremendous barriers to the progress of the gospel—the blindness of the human heart, the blinding activity of Satan, and

his work to persecute and hinder as is so evident in this epistle. Thus, we must pray for God's blessing and work to remove the barriers to the progress of the Word (cf. 1 Thess. 2:18 with 3:10-11).

The Need of the Flock of God

(1) To appreciate the Word—Right Attitudes. Appreciation of the Word is seen in the attitudes of the Thessalonian believers who received the Apostles' message not as the word of men, but for what it really was and is, the Word of God. This is the attitude which recognizes the Bible's uniqueness—different from all other books in its origin, character, content, and cost. How is your attitude? Would we rather have our Bible than food?

Job said, "I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food" (Job 23:12).

Peter wrote, "like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2).

Christ said, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).

The Psalmists wrote,

7 The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. 8 The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. 9 The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. 10 They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. 11 Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; In keeping them there is great reward. 12 Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults. 13 Also keep back Thy servant from presumptuous sins; Let them not rule over me; Then I shall be blameless, And I shall be acquitted of great transgression (Psalm 19:7-13).

Would we rather have God's Word than money? The Psalmists wrote, "they are more desirable than gold, yes than much fine gold" (Ps. 19:10a), and again, "I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches" (Ps. 119:14, cf. vs. 72 ["thousands of gold and silver"], vs. 127 ["fine gold"], vs. 162 ["great spoil"]). Since it is true that "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21), how and where do we spend our time? The reasons for our pursuits or objectives is very revealing about our real values.

(2) To appropriate the Word—Right Actions. The Thessalonian church again becomes our example. We read they "accepted" the Word. Remember, Paul used two words for receive here. One means to receive from another in the transmission of doctrine. The other means to welcome. One involves the hearing of the ear while the other the hearing of the heart. They did not just hear the Word taught, but they made it a part of their inner person—they appropriated it. This brings to mind some warnings in Scripture:

"He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9). This is the admonition "to take heed **that** you hear." It is found some 16 times in the New Testament. While Christians ought to find more opportunities to hear and study the Word, it seems we live in an age and time in this country when the emphasis in many churches is on everything in the world but the careful study of the Bible.

"Take care **what** you hear" (Mark 4:24). This is a warning against hearing false teachers and the delusions and myths of the world.

"Take care **how** you listen" (Luke 8:18). This is a warning against being careless hearers who are indifferent, can't or won't concentrate, and who want to be entertained (2 Tim. 4:3).

(3) To apply the Word—Right Aims in Bible Study. The great aim of all Bible study is its personal application or obedience to the Scripture through faith knowing that God's way is always best and His means of protection for individuals and for society (Jam. 1:19-25; 2 Tim. 3:17; Luke 11:27-28; Ps. 119).

Their Response to the Word in Suffering (2:14)

2:14 For you became imitators, brothers and sisters, of God’s churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, because you too suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they in fact did from the Jews,

While verses 13-16 deal with the conduct of the Thessalonians and verses 17-20 with the conduct of Paul and his associates, another common theme that exists in all of these verses is the theme of suffering which very often occurs because of our faith in Christ. It is a continuation of Satan’s and the world’s opposition to the Savior (John 15:18-27; 1 Thess. 3:3). We can outline the theme of suffering or persecution in these verses as follows:

- Verses 14-16 speak of *a Certainty in Life—the Fact of Suffering* because of one’s faith in Christ.
- Verses 17-18 continue the thought of suffering, but address it from the standpoint of *the Cause—the Fight or Battle With Satan*.
- Verses 19-20 conclude this section, but address suffering from the standpoint of *our Capacity to Endure—Faith in Our Future Hope and Rewards*.

Scripture addresses suffering in various ways but it seems that the goal is nearly always to comfort and give courage to carry on rather than give in. In general, the Bible teaches us that suffering is a tool that God uses like a master craftsman to promote our growth, build our faith, transform our lives, change our sources of trust, change our values and priorities or remove the dross, demonstrate His power, and enhance our testimony to both men and angels.

The Capacity and Connection (vs. 14a)

“For you became imitators ... of God’s churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea” introduces us to the proof of the powerful working of the Word in the lives of those who receive, welcome, and trust in its truth. “For” is the Greek *gar*, a conjunction used to introduce a cause or reason, or an explanation. It takes us from the general statement about the Word in verse 13 to a specific illustration—the way these believers handled their suffering or persecution through, as James put it, “the implanted or engrafted Word, which is able to deliver your souls or lives” (Jam. 1:21). Thus, as an evidence of the power of the indwelling Word, the suffering experience of the churches in Judea was reproduced in the believers at Thessalonica.

When we believe and live by the Word, it changes us and forms us into what Christians ought to become in a sinful world; that will sometimes mean suffering depending on the condition of the society in which one is living (cf. 1 Pet. 4:1-4). Regardless, suffering, no matter what the source, is a tool God uses for our growth and spiritual maturity (Jam. 1:2-4).

The Commonality and Cause of Their Persecution (vs. 14b)

The Thessalonian believers became imitators of the Judean church in suffering for the Lord or for their faith (vs. 14). “Imitators” is again the Greek *mimēte*, from which we get our word “mimic.” As mentioned previously, this word has no negative connotation as it sometimes does in our language. As a quick review: The idea of this word is that of modeling, becoming like, or following after another. It stresses the nature of a particular kind of behavior modeled by another that we are to follow. In the New Testament, it always has a spiritual, ethical or moral emphasis and is generally linked with an obligation to a certain kind of conduct or character as a product of faith. It is linked to certain ones who are living examples for the life of faith.

The Apostle compared the problems Christians at Thessalonica faced from their fellow Greeks with those of the Christians in Judea who were persecuted by their own countrymen, the Jews. This was not an imitation by choice as it had been in following the example of Paul and his associates, but the result of the continuing quarrel of the world that stands in opposition to the Savior. “In Judea” points out the geographical difference while “in Christ” points to their spiritual position and the common bond that becomes the bone of contention with the world no matter what the geographical location. Because of this, there is a common sharing in persecution all over the world. Because of our Christian heritage on which this nation was founded, we have escaped severe persecution in our country, but in view

of the way we have turned away from our Judo-Christian heritage, we will undoubtedly see more and more of this in the U.S.

In our society today, Paul's statement in verses 14b and 15 would be called religious bigotry. Was it? Not at all! He was simply stating a fact. It was Jews along with the Romans who put Christ on the cross (cf. Acts 2:23). But it was the religious Jews themselves who created so much persecution for the Christian community which at first was comprised of Jews alone. In fact, at first, Paul himself had a large part in the persecution of the Jewish church. Though he doesn't mention it here, he does in other places.

Further, according to the record in Acts 17, it was the Jews in Thessalonica who persecuted the missionaries and drove them out of town. But here in 2:14, we are told that it was their own countrymen, i.e., Gentiles, who were persecuting the Thessalonian church.

Perhaps the Thessalonians were surprised and extremely hurt that their own countrymen would persecute them. To comfort them, Paul reminds them that they are imitators of the suffering of the churches of God in Christ Jesus in Judea who likewise suffered from their own countrymen. This reminds us that no matter where we go, Satan, the god of this world, stands opposed to the gospel and to Christians and will do his best to both thwart the message and attack believers.

An Illustration of *Rejection of the Word*—A Source of Suffering (2:15-16)

2:15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and persecuted us severely. They are displeasing to God and are opposed to all people, **2:16** because they hinder us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they constantly fill up their measure of sins, but wrath has come upon them completely.

The Continuation of Persecution (vs. 15a)

Having mentioned the Jews in verse 14, the Apostle then elaborates on the history (vs. 15a) and the nature, character, and goal of these persecutors (vss. 15b-16) who seek to hinder the propagation of the gospel. They are those who have rejected the divine Word, the message of the suffering Savior. By indicting them for killing the Lord Jesus and the prophets, Paul reminds the Thessalonians and us that suffering at the hands of one's own countrymen and even family is par for the course. It is not only not unusual, but it is simply the continuation of Satan's and the world's fight against God's plan of salvation as revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ. Compare Luke 20:9-19 for a commentary on this principle.

The Character of the Persecutors (vss. 15b-16a)

"They are displeasing to God and opposed to people" or as the NASB, "They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to men." These words don't just state a fact, but are designed to comfort and promote the Thessalonians' endurance under suffering by explaining the character of their persecutors.

First, "They are displeasing to God." The present tense of the verb used here stresses this as a constant condition for the Jewish nation as a whole (excluding the believing remnant, of course) and particularly, the religious leaders who rejected Christ and turned the majority of the nation away from the Lord.

We might wonder why the Apostle made this statement about the Jews? The first part of the answer perhaps lies in the irony of this because it is so typical of the religious self-righteous person.

- These Jews had a great zeal for God and were confident they were guides to the blind and a light to those walking in darkness, but they were in reality without a true knowledge of God and were blind leaders of the blind (see Rom. 10:2; 2:19f.; Matt. 23:16).
- They thought they were actually pleasing God when they persecuted Christians but in reality they were doing the opposite (John 16:2, "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.").

- They thought they were the God pleasers because they observed the Law, but in reality they were seeking to establish their own righteousness which can never please God (see Rom. 10:3; John 5:37-47). Pleasing God starts with trusting in God's own Son.

Second, it assured the Thessalonians they were on God's side and that such persecution was an act against the Lord Himself. Such suffering was a token of their right relationship with God.

Third, this statement assured these believers that they were not to blame. The persecution was not only against the Thessalonians, but it was really an act against God and an act that clearly displeased Him. Paul knew that people who are abused by others often think the cause for abuse lies with them, so the Apostle assures them otherwise.

Next, we read that they were "opposed to people," or "hostile to all men." Their actions of persecution showed they really stood in opposition to mankind. "Opposed" or "hostile" is enantios, which means, "opposed, contrary, hostile, against." May I suggest three things here:

- When men fail to please God, they will ultimately stand in opposition to mankind individually or corporately. When we fail to please the Lord, we ultimately become hostile or at least useless not only to God, but to men. The only way to meet the needs of men is by first seeking to please the Lord by putting His agenda first.
- Pleasing God means learning to live for others according to what is best for them according to the Scripture and not simply to please ourselves.
- God pleasers are neither men pleasers nor self-pleasers. The only time we should seek to please men is when we seek to benefit them by putting their needs above our own for their edification or salvation.

"Because they hinder us from speaking ..." "Hinder" is a present participle which not only points to the cause (an adverbial causal participle), but the present tense points this out as a pattern that manifests itself over and over again. Here is the primary thing that displeased God and was against men. This was not just a matter of passive unbelief, nor just failure to get involved with God's plan, as bad as both of these are. No, an active opposition to the preaching of the good news to the lost was the issue here. But actually, when we are passive or fail to get involved with God's plan for our lives as those committed to the Great Commission, making disciples, etc., we ultimately do the same thing, don't we? We hinder the propagation of the Good News and the training of people in the Savior.

The Consequence to the Persecutors (vs. 16b)

The first Consequence is the judgment in men themselves. When men reject the message of Jesus Christ, then God must turn them over to the consequences of their choice.

- God sometimes allows men to go on in sin, i.e., fill to the brim their lives with sin because of His longsuffering, grace, love and mercy (2 Pet. 3:9; Rom. 2:4).
- He allows them to go on in sin to demonstrate what He sees in man. Filling up the measure of their sins demonstrates the true character of man, his total lostness, and their need of grace provision of God in Christ.
- He also allows them to go on in sin to demonstrate the righteousness of His judgments when they do come (cf. Gen. 15:16; Ps. 89:2, 14).

The second Consequence is the judgment brought directly against man. "Wrath" refers to the judgment meted out against the nation of Israel for her constant stiff necked condition as prophesied in Deuteronomy 28:15-68.

- It includes the captivities of Israel and then Judah. When Paul wrote this, the Jews were even then under Roman rule as a judgment from God.
- But an even greater judgment would soon come, the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of A.D. 70 when the Roman armies would march on Jerusalem.
- Still, a greater future judgment would come in the days of the Tribulation called the "coming wrath" in 1:10 also known in Scripture as "the time of Jacob's distress" (Jer. 30:7).

- Finally, those who reject the gospel message of salvation in Christ will face the wrath of the Great White Throne Judgment of Revelation 20.

“Upon them completely” (NET) or “to the utmost” (NASB) is a Greek expression (*eis telos*) which can mean (1) at the end, or unto the end i.e., of a period of time as the church age, the final period before the Day of the Lord, or (2) to the utmost in the sense of the extent or limit of the wrath. It would then refer to their complete dispersion among all the nations which, of course, would one day culminate in the end time horrors of the Tribulation followed by the Throne Judgment of Revelation 20.

First, Paul encouraged these suffering Christian by assuring them of the commonality of their experiences of suffering. Their experiences were not new nor isolated. They were common to believers. Others had suffered before them, some were even then suffering with them, and others would suffer after them.

Second, the churches in Judea had not been exterminated by suffering. If anything, they had been purified and increased.⁹

Third, Scripture reminds us, then, that believers are saved to the utmost (Heb. 7:25) while sinners will experience wrath to the utmost (1 Thess. 2:16). The suffering of the Thessalonian believers was a token of their salvation, and a token of the judgment of their persecutors.

Warren Wiersbe writes:

Here is one of the great values of the local church: we stand together in times of difficulty and encourage one another. It was when Elijah isolated himself from the other faithful Israelites that he became discouraged and wanted to quit. One reason Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica was to encourage the believers. A lonely saint is very vulnerable to the attacks of Satan. We need each other in the battles of life.¹⁰

For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day (2 Tim. 1:12).

Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 2:3).

... for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned (2 Tim. 2:9).

The Concern of the Apostle and His Associates (2:17-20)

2:17 But when we were separated from you, brothers and sisters, for a short time (in presence, not in affection) we became all the more fervent in our great desire to see you in person. **2:18** Because we wanted to come to you (I, Paul, in fact tried again and again) but Satan thwarted us. **2:19** For who is our hope or joy or crown to boast of before our Lord Jesus at his coming—is it not of course you? **2:20** For you are our glory and joy!

Paul’s Heart for the Thessalonians (vs. 17)

As mentioned, there were those who were accusing Paul and his coworkers of not caring for the Thessalonians. If they really cared, why hadn’t they returned? So verses 17-18 (1) express the Apostle’s concern and desire to see the Thessalonians, (2) give the reason for his absence or failure to return, and (3) state the fact that though absent in person, they were with them in spirit. These words clearly demonstrate their pastoral concern and care as also declared in verses 1-12.

With Paul’s statement, “But when we were separated from you,” he strongly expressed his parental love and feeling of desolation by his absence. “Separated” is *aporphanizo*, from which we get our word “orphan.” It was used

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 54.

¹⁰ Wiersbe, p. 54.

of a parentless child, or of childless parents, and even in a general sense of any severe deprivation or desolation.¹¹ The use of this word suits the parental pictures used back in verses 7 and 11.

“For a short time,” literally, “for a season of an hour,” expresses his intention and desire to return as soon as possible. “In presence, not in affection,” literally, “in face, not in heart,” expresses the fact that while he could not be there with them, they were on his mind and in his thoughts just like a parent who is separated from his child or children.

“We became all the more fervent in our great desire ...” declares their commitment to get back to see the Thesalonians. Literally, the text says, “more abundantly (or perhaps, *excessively*) we endeavored (*made haste*), your face to see with great desire.” What efforts were made are not recorded, but from this it is evident the Apostle was not easily persuaded to leave and did more than his best to find some way to return.

Paul’s Hindrance by Satan (vs. 18)

Verse 18 continues the explanation, only now he points to the source of the problem and one of the great causes of suffering in the human race, especially for believers.

“For” is dioti which means “because.” It points us to the cause, which is Satan. Not only had the missionary team desired to see these believers, but at least twice, Paul personally tried to come. In both instances, he was faced with the obstacle of Satanic activity.

“Satan thwarted us.” Satan is ho satanas, which means “the adversary.” In the New Testament it occurs 36 times and always with reference to the adversary, the enemy of God and the enemy all those who belong to Him. Satan is a fallen angel, and not merely the personification of evil. He is seen in Scripture as possessing all the attributes of personality—intelligence, volition, emotions, and moral responsibility. He has a number of other names in Scripture which, consistent with the significance of names in the Bible, point to his insidious character and works. Two such well known terms are: (a) The devil (ho diabollos) which means “the slanderer, defamer.” This stresses his activity and goal of impugning the character of God (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8). In this passage in 1 Peter, he is called “the adversary,” ho antidikos, another word that is similar in meaning to satanas or *satan*. Specifically, antidikos means an opponent in a lawsuit and suggests a court scene where accusations are made. (b) Another important term is “the serpent” (Rev. 12:9). This title obviously looks back to Genesis 3 and the temptation and stresses Satan’s deceitful and crafty nature (2 Cor. 11:2).¹²

In the Bible, Satan is not represented as a rival deity, co-equal with, or only slightly inferior to God or Christ. He is always revealed to be a rebellious creature of God, subordinate to God, and holding his authority as allowed from God, even when he uses his rebellion against God.

“Thwarted” is enkopto,, and means literally, “to cut into,” but is used figuratively in the sense of “to impede, hinder, detain.” It was used (1) in a military sense of making a break through the enemy’s line, or (2) of an athlete cutting in front of someone in a race. It means to impede the progress of another by cutting off his course. This shows how the activity of Satan is consistent with his names.

With this focus in mind, let’s think a moment about Satan’s strategy or chief scheme as it is shown in Scripture. A strategy is a careful plan or method devised to accomplish a goal or purpose.

(1) Satan’s Goals

- Dethrone God and enthrone himself (Isa. 14:12-16).
- Degrade (slander) God’s character (Job 1:1-11). Again compare the titles or descriptions given him in the Bible: Devil (slanderer), Satan (adversary), and accuser (Rev. 12:10).
- Dominate man and destroy God’s purposes with man (Heb. 2:14-16).

(2) Satan’s Strategy

¹¹ Rienecker, p. 593.

¹² For more details of Satan, his origin, nature, character, and activities, see the study on Satanology on our web site under the Theology Section.

- Degrades and denies God's Word (Gen. 3:1). "Indeed, has God said, ..." and vs. 4 "you surely shall not die!"
- Deposits and displaces God's plan and provision. He offers his substitutes like asceticism, religionism, ritualism, emotionalism, mysticism, rationalism, etc., and attacks the people of God in every way he can (Col. 2:1-10, 16-23; Isa. 2:6).
- Delusions of godhood, "you will be as God" (cf. Gen. 3:5; with Isa. 14:14). Seeks to make man think he (man) is the measure and goal of everything.
- Deceives through moral relativity, "knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3).
- Disguises his presence and actions (2 Cor. 11:14).
- Distorts the truth and blessings of God (he is a pervert) (Acts 13:10). He takes that which God has created as good and perverts it through his delusions and by turning man away from the moral absolutes of the Word (e.g., sex via adultery, homosexuality, pornography, child molestation, incest, the gay movement as an alternate lifestyle).

These verses call to mind a crucial topic of Scripture and the cause for Paul's and his associates' quick retreat and inability to return. What was the cause? The angelic conflict or the fight that is raging night and day with Satan and the forces at his disposal (see Dan. 10; Eph. 6:10f.).

However, if we read the book of Acts and the preceding context of 1 Thessalonians, we find that it was men who had driven Paul and his partners in ministry out of the city and were keeping them from returning, yet the Apostle attributes all this not simply to men, but to Satan.

This is the subtlety and deceptiveness of what is going on all around us every day. We normally do not see Satan or demons in person. Normally what we see are human beings and strategies and values that oppose the plan of God. We do not see a literal Satan in person or his demonic forces because they are spirit beings. Don't expect to find Satan as obvious as a serpent on the sidewalk.

Occasionally, we may see or hear of demonic apparitions, and demonic voices coming out of demon possessed people who are also able to perform supernatural acts, but that's about the extent of it. So what happens? We tend to ignore the reality of who we are really dealing with. We talk about it. We believe it intellectually, but we tend to ignore the reality of Satan and his demonic hosts by our failure to draw close to the Lord, by our failure to use our armor, and our neglect of corporate prayer. But Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:12 that "our struggle is not with flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places." Is he saying that we have no struggle with rebellious men and sinful people? No! He is saying that behind the scenes and working through people and the world system are super powerful demonic forces (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-3 where Paul speaks first of demonic activity leading to false doctrine, and then of men proclaiming Satan's doctrines. But the source is Satan.).

Consequently, the Apostle challenges us in a general way in Ephesians 6:10-11, and then in verses 13-18 we are specifically exhorted to "put on" the spiritual armor of God provided for our defense. Satan will do everything he can to hinder us, neutralize us, or destroy us.

- He will attempt to work from within the body (the church) to stir up trouble.
- He will work through religious people as the Jews of Paul's day or the cults of our day.
- He will work through the general philosophies, ideologies, and myths of the world.
- He will work through politics, or economics, or government, or the work place.

But there is a wonderful and comforting truth here in 1 Thessalonians 2. While Paul was hindered from returning, he continued to have a ministry and to teach the Word. He remained useful. He was not defeated because he knew the Lord was in control and that though he may be bound and hindered, the Word was not bound (cf. 3:11; 2 Thess. 3:1; 2 Tim. 2:9-10).

Paul's Hope in the Thessalonians (vss. 19-20)

The Question—What is their hope or joy or crown? (2:19a)

“For” (the Greek coordinating or explanatory conjunction *gar*) introduces us to Paul’s reason for his steadfastness of spirit in view of the hindrance and his reason for so wanting to return.

“Who is our ...” introduces us to Paul’s reason which is presented in the form of a rhetorical question. It is designed to stress the reason more forcefully and to get the reader to think. “Who” refers to the believers of Thessalonica. In essence, the Apostle declares the Thessalonians are three things to Paul and his companions.

(1) “Our hope.” “Our” reminds us this was a team effort. “Hope” refers to the confident expectation that existed in their hearts in light of the prophetic promises of the Word. Hope involves what has not taken place, but is confidently expected through faith. The text declares these believers were themselves the hope of the Apostle and his companions.

(2) “Or joy.” The Thessalonians were also a source of joy and spiritual delight, not only in the present time, but in the future at the return of the Lord. Seeing them in heaven would bring great joy, but seeing them rewarded would bring even greater joy. For this reason, Paul wanted to return to continue the work they had begun that they might grow and become even more fruitful.

(3) “Or crown to boast of.” Literally, “Crown of boasting or exultation.” “Paul uses boasting or exultation to describe the Christian’s delight in being commended for faithful service by the Lord at his return.”¹³ The Thessalonians are the crown, and the result at the Bema will be rejoicing or exultation. But what did he mean by this? In view of Paul’s use of “crown” (*stephanos*, the victor’s crown) in other places, and the fact believers will cast their crowns before the Lord (Rev. 4:10), Paul undoubtedly had in mind a personal crown or reward that believers will receive because of their presence at the return of the Lord for faithful ministry. Though, in this passage the Apostle does not say he would receive a crown, this is suggested, if not here certainly in other passages. Some of these believers were not living as they should, but by looking ahead and seeing them in glory, Paul received joy then and knew there would be great rejoicing in the future.

Because of the reference to a crown of exultation, “in the presence of the Lord at His coming” seems to be a clear reference to the next major phase of God’s program for the church—the rapture and the judgment seat of Christ. This is supported by the term “presence,” *emprosthen*, a preposition meaning “before, in front of” (cf. 3:13). It clearly portrays the idea of being before the judgment seat of Christ, the Bema.¹⁴

Another important term here is “coming,” the Greek term *parousia*. This is a very important word used of the return of the Lord. It is rendered in the English Bible by our words “coming” or “presence.” It comes from a verb *pareimi*, which means “to be present” as in Luke 13:1, John 11:28, and Acts 10:33. It refers to a stay, a presence that follows an arrival or a coming.

In a papyrus document it refers to a royal visit to a certain district; in another, a person states that the care of her property demands her ‘presence’ in a certain city. In Phil. 2:12 Paul speaks of his *parousia*, his ‘presence,’ at Philippi, in contrast with his *apousia*, his ‘absence,’ from the city. Always, wherever it occurs, *parousia* refers to a period of time more or less extended. The usual translation is misleading, because ‘coming’ is more appropriate to other words, such as *erchomai*, Luke 12:45; 19:23; *eleusis*, Acts 7:52; ... the difference being that whereas these words fix the attention on the journey to, and the arrival at, a place, *parousia* fixes it on the stay which follows on the arrival there. It would be preferable, therefore, to transliterate the word rather than translate it, that is to use ‘parousia,’ rather than ‘coming,’ wherever the reference is to the Lord Jesus.¹⁵

¹³ NET Bible notes, The Biblical Studies Foundation, electronic edition.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the *Bema*, see *The Doctrine of Rewards* under the “Bible Studies / Theology / Eschatology” section on the BSF web site at www.bible.org.

¹⁵ Hogg and Vine, p. 87.

“... Where it is used prophetically, *parousia* refers to a period beginning with the descent of the Lord from heaven into the air; I Thess. 4:16, 17, and ending with His revelation and manifestation to the world.”¹⁶ But it may also focus on the course of events in between like the Bema.

During the Parousia of the Lord in the air with his people, Paul expected to give account of his stewardship before the Judgment Seat of Christ, 1 Cor. 4:1-5, 2 Cor. 5:10; the presence there of the Thessalonian converts and their commendation by the Lord, would mean reward to the evangelists and his associates who had been the means of their conversion, and to the pastors and teachers who had labored among them ...

The Parousia of the Lord Jesus is thus a period of time with a beginning, a course, and a conclusion. In some passages the beginning, the arrival is the prominent element. In others, the course, and in others the conclusion are the prominent elements.¹⁷

The beginning: 1 Thess. 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1; 1 Co. 15:23; Jas. 5:7,8; 2 Pet. 3:4.

The course: 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; Matt. 24:3, 37, 39, 1 Jn. 2:28.

The conclusion: 2 Thess. 2:8; Matt. 24:27.

The Answer—Those to whom believers minister will become their glory and joy (2:19b-20)

With the words, “is it not of course you?,” Paul states these believers were their hope, joy, and crown of rejoicing or exultation at the parousia. Paul seems to mean the Thessalonians, who had responded to his ministry and labor and to that of his companions, were the source of their hope, etc. Because they had labored, because these believers had responded and would be in heaven with rewards of their own, and because the Lord rewards His saints for their labor, the Thessalonians had become their hope, joy, and crown of rejoicing. This idea is again repeated in verse 20.

Conclusion

One of the great motivations God gives us for endurance and ministry is the hope of the Savior’s return, being in the presence of His glory, and eternal rewards. Though crowns or rewards are not mentioned here, Paul surely has this in view and addresses this as a further support for their concern and love for the Thessalonians (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 4:1-5; 2 Cor. 5:9-10).

One of the most difficult challenges we have as we face the disappointments and trials of life is our focus. Our natural tendency is to look at life from a purely temporal perspective. This is the mentality of the world or the worldling whom the Bible often describes as an “earth dweller.” However, the Christian life is a life of faith which the author of Hebrews describes as “the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). And to endure and carry on in God’s calling on our lives, we must live by faith and not by sight while staying focused on the Savior and eternal realities as He Himself did (cf. 2 Cor. 5:8 with Heb. 12:1-3 and 2 Cor. 4:16-21).

This is one of the reasons living in the Word is so essential because faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). Through the lens of Scripture, we are able to keep our eyes riveted on the fact of God’s presence, His love and care, and His promises of the eternal future.

In 2:17-18, Paul expressed his desire to be with these believers, but Satan had hindered that from taking place. Further, he had been accused of not caring for these believers, but rather than looking back and giving in to regret, remorse, and depression, he looked ahead and rejoiced because, for believers in Christ, the best is yet to come. So the Apostle looked ahead by faith and saw himself, his associates, and the Thessalonian believers in glory in the presence of Jesus Christ at His coming.

In times of trial and disappointment when our tendency is to allow the situation to overcome our perspective and defeat our commitment or create discouragement and complaints, we need to take the long view of life. We must learn to live in the present in the light of the future and allow that to govern our attitudes and actions.

¹⁶ Hogg and Vine, p. 88.

¹⁷ Hogg and Vine, p. 88.

Not only did the Apostle know that God was still on the throne and in charge (3:11), but he lived in light of eschatology, the doctrine of Christ's return, the rapture, our glorification, and the Bema, the Judgment Seat of Christ and rewards. These were not just theological ideas he believed intellectually, but biblical truths that affected his life dynamically. He knew the Lord would return and reward him and all believers for faithful service.

It is tremendously significant that among the final words of the last book of the Bible, Revelation, we find these words of the Lord: "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done" (Rev. 22:12).

While salvation is a gift, there will be rewards for faithfulness in the Christian life and loss of rewards for unfaithfulness. Rewards become one of the great motivations of the Christian's life (or should). But we need to understand the nature of these rewards to understand the nature of the motivation. Some people are troubled by the doctrine of rewards because this seems to suggest "merit" instead of "grace," and because, as it is pointed out, we should serve the Lord out of love and for God's glory.

Of course we should serve the Lord out of love and for God's glory. Understanding the nature of rewards will help us to do just that. But the fact still remains that the Bible promises us rewards. God gives us salvation. It is a gift through faith. But He rewards us for good works when done in the power of the Spirit. God graciously supplies the means by which we may serve Him, but the decision to serve, and the diligence employed in doing so, are our responsibility and our contribution and God sees this as rewardable (cf. Col. 1:29; 1 Cor. 15:10).

Lesson 6: The Concern Expressed (1 Thess. 3:1-13)

Introduction

In chapter 2, in answer to the accusations leveled against the Apostle by the enemies of the gospel, Paul reviewed his ministry among the Thessalonians as a nursing mother and an encouraging father (2:1-12). Having then declared their thankfulness for the wonderful way the Thessalonians had responded to the gospel as it was in truth, the effectual Word of God (2:13), he addressed their common experience of suffering (2:14-20). As seen, verses 14-16 speak of the fact of suffering because of one's faith in Christ while verses 17-18 continue the thought of suffering, but address it from the standpoint of the cause—the fight or battle with Satan. Following that, in verses 19-20 he addresses the subject of suffering from the standpoint of our hope or that which motivated them to endure, faith in our future hope and rewards.

Now, even though he has basically silenced the false insinuations of his opponents regarding a lack of concern, in chapter 3 the Apostle not only continues to show their deep love and concern, but seeks to dull the pain of their separation from this body of believers. However, as Paul continues to express their concern and heart for the Thessalonians, we also see what motivated and guided him in his ministry to men. Not only does he expose a pastoral heart, but one that was directed by biblical goals and objectives. Again we get a glimpse of the great mission or objective of the Apostle as expressed in Colossians 1:28-29.

1:28 We proclaim him by instructing and teaching all men with all wisdom so *that we may present every man mature in Christ*. **1:29** Toward this goal I also labor, struggling according to his power that powerfully works in me. (emphasis mine)

As also stated in Ephesians 4:11-16, Paul's objective was to bring believers to full Christ-like maturity of faith according to the standards of biblical wisdom.

When a person puts their trust in Christ, he or she is born into the family of God as a babe in Christ. Babies need to grow. They need to learn to crawl, then stand, and then walk. As stated in chapter two, Paul saw himself as a spiritual parent to these believers and, as a parent, he was concerned for their growth in Christ. He wanted to see their faith developed and see them become more and more stable and mature. This is a repeated emphasis in this chapter, which shows his pastoral concern for the condition of their faith (vss. 2-3, 5, 6, 7-8, 10). Two key ideas of chapter three are spiritual stability and spiritual growth as expressed in verses 8 and 10.

In this we have an excellent example of pastoral objectives for elders, disciple makers, and parents. One of the biblical purposes of the church is the edification of the flock. For that to happen, church leaders must examine the situations they are facing with their people (i.e., Paul's separation, their pressures, the fact these were relatively new Christians, etc.), check out their options (what are the possibilities for this flock), and then develop procedures for accomplishing the critical biblical objective of building their faith. That is precisely what the Apostle did.

First, we see that there was the necessary burden and concern to want to do what was needed (vs. 1). Second, Paul then examined his options. He wanted to go, but due to the circumstance that led to his expulsion, he, as the leader and one they would easily recognize, could not at that point return. Remember, Paul had planned several times to return to Thessalonica, but was hindered by Satan. This undoubtedly refers to the security taken of Jason (Acts 17:9), which most likely included a guarantee that Paul would not return to the city. Thus, praying about and examining his options with his missionary team, Paul explained three ministries that he performed on behalf of these believers all of which were in keeping with their biblical objectives: (1) he sent a helper (vss. 1-8), (2) he prayed earnestly for them (vss. 9-13), and (3) sent this letter to encourage, instruct, and warn them all with a view to building them up even more in the Lord.

The Helper Sent to the Thessalonians (3:1-8)

3:1 So when we could bear it no longer, we decided to stay on in Athens alone. **3:2** We sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow-worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen you and encourage you about your faith, **3:3** so that no one would be shaken by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. **3:4** For in fact when we were with you, we were telling you in advance that we would suffer affliction, and so it has happened as you well know. **3:5** So when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter somehow tempted you and our toil had proven useless.

3:6 But now Timothy has come to us from you and given us the good news of your faith and love and that you always think of us with affection and long to see us just as we also long to see you! **3:7** So in all our distress and affliction, we were reassured about you, brothers and sisters, through your faith. **3:8** For now we are alive again, if you stand firm in the Lord.

The Catalyst for Sending Timothy—Their Concern (vs. 1)

“So then.” This opening conjunction (dio, “wherefore, on which account”) connects this verse with the preceding chapter where the Apostle expressed his care for the Thessalonians. It was because of his concern and love for them that he not only would not, but could not abandon them when they needed spiritual growth. Again, this not only reveals pastoral concern, but a biblical perspective. Leading a person to the Lord is only the first step in the discipleship process.

“When we could bear it no longer.” “Bear it” (“endure” NASB) is *stegoō*, which means “to protect by covering, then cover up with silence” much as a roof over a house both protects from the elements and conceals. From this it came to mean simply “endure.” Certainly we can see something of the pastoral heart in this—they were so concerned, they could no longer keep it concealed nor endure not doing what was needed. This demonstrates how effective ministry has its source not only in having biblical goals, but in loving concern and burden.

“We decided to stay on in Athens alone,” or “We thought it best to be left behind” (NASB). The words Paul chose here are full of instruction. The first is *eudokeō*, which means “to be well pleased, to willingly determine, to think it a good thing to do.” It stresses the willingness, the positive choice. Too often, ministry is performed out of a sense of, “Well, if I have to.” The option the missionary team chose was not done grudgingly. The second word is *kataleipoō*, which meant “to leave, leave behind” or in the passive, “be left alone or behind, be forsaken.” The word was used of leaving loved ones at death. It could carry the idea of being bereaved. The idea here is they needed Timothy in their present work, but because of their concern for this church, they were willing to be forsaken. It says much both of their heart for the people and for Timothy. Paul and his associates were not hirelings. They ministered and made choices out of loving concern for others.

The Character of Timothy—The Helper Sent (vs. 2a)

One of the great needs in the body of Christ is more Timothy-like believers, men and women who are mature and committed enough to be able to take on an assignment like this. Certainly, part of one's ability to do this depends on one's spiritual gift and training, but all believers should be able to do this to some degree if they have not been negligent in their own spiritual growth (Heb. 5:11-14) and if the church leadership is faithful to equip its members for ministry (Eph. 4:11-16). The problem is that (1) we have too many believers in the body of Christ who are in the condition of those discussed in Hebrews 5:11-14, or (2) they are so tangled up in the affairs of this life, they have no desire, burden, or time for ministry (2 Tim. 2:4; Heb. 12:1-2), or (3) the leaders of the church are simply not equipping others for ministry (Eph. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 2:1-4).

Paul mentions two qualifications of Timothy's character in verse 2. First, Paul describes Timothy as “our brother.” To be qualified to minister to others in true Christian ministry one must first be a Christian himself. “Brother” is basically a technical term for a believer, one who has been born into the family of God by the new birth.

Second, Timothy is described as “God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ.” To be able to minister to others, we must understand and accept the fact we are to be more than simply a brother or a Christian. Being a Christian brother also means caring for the family and that means being God's fellow worker. But what exactly is a fellow

worker? “Fellow worker” is *sunergos*, from *ergon*, “work, deed, task, employment,” plus the preposition *sun*, “with, together.” This word refers to someone who is a team player. This is someone who does not seek to run or control things on his own, nor serve for selfish or personal agendas. There are two aspects of a team player in the body of Christ:

1. He or she is one who is a fellow worker with God. The head of the body is the Lord Jesus. The church belongs to Christ, not us. This means we are to get our orders and spiritual strength from the Lord and allow Him to work in and through us. We work as God’s fellow workers by submission to Him and by faith in His provision.
2. This also means we are to work together with our brethren in Christ as a part of God’s team. There is no such thing as a one-man team. We work to build up others and to help the body to function as a body. It means team work with each believer doing his share for the goals of the Head and the team.

In addition, *sunergos*, brings out the fact that Timothy was a worker, which, in New Testament terms, means a minister or a servant of others. Selfish, self-centered agendas spoil our ability to not only be team players, but to work as servants.

The Charge Assigned to Timothy—His Objectives (vs. 2b)

As we work in and for the body of Christ, it is naturally important that we know what we are to do. It is so easy to get side tracked by our own personal agendas or objectives or by the objectives of people who want to dictate the priorities of ministry. It has been my experience that too often this is not in keeping with the major goals of the Bible (cf. Acts 6:1-7). Thus, we need constant evaluation here concerning our pursuits and activities as a church. An important question is this: Is what we are doing contributing to the mission, goals, and objectives of the Word for the body of Christ?

Timothy’s objectives and thus his procedures were set down for him according to biblical aims. He was to return to Thessalonica to strengthen and encourage them as to their faith. What does this mean?

“Strengthen” is *sterizo*, which means “to support, stabilize, establish, fix, strengthen.” This word is used 14 times in the New Testament and in all but two of its uses, it is used metaphorically of providing some form of spiritual stability or strength.

It points up one of our basic needs—spiritual stability. Because of his fallenness, man is inherently unstable emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and volitionally. It calls attention to our tendency toward fluctuations in moods, viewpoints, attitudes, and behavior caused by the variegated problems of life—trials, temptations, personal weaknesses, ignorance of biblical truth, eyes off the Lord, walking in unbelief or being weak in our faith or having the wrong objects of faith, etc.

So Timothy was to remove whatever instability he might find. But how was he to do this? The means emphasized in the New Testament for accomplishing this are:

- The Word or Truth of Scripture (cf. Luke 22:32 with John 21; Rom. 16:25)
- Fervent and consistent prayer (1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 2:17; 3:3)
- Looking for the coming of the Lord (Jam. 5:7-8)
- God’s work through suffering (1 Pet. 5:10)
- The exercise of our spiritual gifts on behalf of others (Rom. 1:11; 2 Pet. 1:12; Rom. 16:25; 1 Thess. 3:2)
- Restoration to fellowship (Rev. 3:2-3)

Of course, the key to spiritual strength and stability is our faith, so Timothy was sent to “encourage you about your faith.” “Encourage” is *parakaleo*, which has (1) a prospective appeal meaning “to exhort, entreat to action,” or (2) a retrospective appeal meaning “to encourage, comfort, cheer up, or help.” It is the first word of the trio used in 2:11. There it means “to exhort.” From the context of the next verse, here it means “to encourage.”

“About your faith” points to the area that needs stabilizing and encouraging. “About” is the Greek *huper*, which is best understood here as “on behalf.” The goal was to help them rest or trust in God’s provision and control. Insta-

bility and discouragement is usually the result of a faith that is weak, out of focus, or focused on the wrong object. Paul mentions his concern for their faith four times in this section (vss. 1-8). One of the objects or goals of a firm faith is spiritual stability in the face of pressure (cf. vss. 3-4 with vs. 8). One of the goals of faith anchored in the Lord is stability in the ups and downs of life

The Conflict Facing the Church—The Concerns Described (vss. 3-5)

Verse 3a, “so that no one would be shaken by these afflictions,” gives us the intended result or goal which is essentially the spiritual stability which comes from an active faith that rests in the Lord .

“That no one.” These words bring to mind two items of importance for us. It reminds us that God intends for all believers to become spiritually strong and stable in the midst of the disturbing problems of life. Not only are we each to know that affliction is often God’s will for our lives, but that we can experience His strength and supply in the midst of the affliction. This means that through our assets in Christ we all have the capacity and potential to become stable and strong believers. But what are some of the assets God uses to stabilize us? They include such things as:

- The ministry of the Spirit who is described as the Helper or Comforter or Enabler (John 14:16), the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17), and the anointing whom God uses to teach us, guide us, and assure our hearts of His love as our Father (2 John 2:20; Rom. 8:14-16).
- The Word which is alive, powerful, and active, and which teaches us about who God is and what we have in Christ—security, significance, capacity (Heb. 4:12). Though sinners, we are now accepted in Jesus Christ, we belong to the family of God, and we each have important gifts, talents, and a part to play in the plan and kingdom of God (Eph. 1:5-7; John 1:12; Col. 1:12-14).
- God’s plan for learning the Word (a new spiritual capacity for discerning truth, the privilege of private study, corporate study, and encouragement in large and small groups, etc.).
- The privilege of prayer as a priest and as child of God.

“Be shaken” is *saino*, which originally meant “to shake or wag the tail.” It was used especially of a dog wagging his tail to get his way, to allure, etc. It came to mean, “to beguile through flattery or draw aside from the right path.” Remember, Satan told Eve that she would be like God if she ate of the tree and she fell for his lie (cf. vs. 5). But in view of the cause expressed in the words, “by these afflictions,” it is better to understand this in the sense of “shaken, disturbed, moved, agitated.” “By these afflictions” refers to the sufferings they experienced at the hands of their countrymen because of their faith and stand for the Lord Jesus as mentioned back in 2:14.

Verses 3b-4 point to the reasons why they should remain stable. Note the little word “for” in verse 3b. It introduces us to why we should not be disturbed or shaken. There are two things to note here:

(1) They should not be shaken because Paul and his helpers had taught them about the subject of suffering, especially suffering for their faith in Christ (cf. vss. 3b & 4). The principle here is that their knowledge of biblical truth, Bible doctrine, provided the basis for spiritual stability in the face of suffering in all its forms, only one of which is persecution.

(2) They were to remember that the trials or testings that come to us as believers are appointed by God. Undoubtedly, this only summarizes what he had taught them about suffering.

Afflictions are not accidents. “Destined” is *keimai*, which has the idea of “appointed,” or as the NASB and NET Bible have translated it, “destined.” Our trials are part of God’s sovereign plan. Since we live in a fallen world and are called upon “to suffer for His sake” (Phil. 1:29), we should never be surprised by persecution (1 Pet. 4:12f.). As seen previously, Paul gave another reason in 1 Thessalonians 2:16. Sometimes God allows us to be persecuted to show the evil nature of men and the righteousness of His judgment when it falls.^{1, 2}

¹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible, Expanded Edition*, Moody, 1986, 1995, p. 1906.

² For an overview of other reasons for suffering, see “Why Christians Suffer” under the *Bible Studies / Spiritual Life / Miscellaneous* section on our web site at www.bible.org.

Verse 5 again restates his concern and the reason he sent Timothy, only now he also adds the dimension of the activity of Satan as the tempter. “The tempter” is one of the many descriptive titles of the devil that reveal both his character and his activities or strategies. There is an important connection in this verse between the condition of one’s faith and the work of the devil as “the tempter.” One of Satan’s constant objectives is to negatively affect our faith in the promises and truth of God’s Word. He wants us to doubt God’s love. He wants us to depend on our own strategies to handle life and on our human works rather than depend on the Lord and His love.

What exactly does the Apostle mean when he says, “and our toil had proven useless”? “Useless” or “vain” (NASB) is *kenos*, which means “vain, empty, fruitless, without effect, without reaching its goal.” Paul knew that no labor in the Lord is in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). We have the Lord’s promise that He will reward us for faithful labors. But he also knew, because of the workings of Satan, some of his labor could be annulled or tarnished as to its effect on the lives of others, i.e., hindered from reaching its goal. This is why the Apostle was so concerned about their faith and took steps to protect his labor. For an illustration of this compare the parable of the sower, the seed, and the soils (Mark 4:14f.).

By way of application, this should first remind us of the need to be prayerfully on alert for other members of the body of Christ, our spiritual family. Satan is at work day and night to neutralize our faith and nullify all the work that has gone on in building and training believers in the Lord. But also, I trust we see how the reality of Satan’s activity and objectives actually impacted the heart and ministry of the Apostle.

The Comfort of the Apostle—News of Their Stability (vss. 6-8)

Verses 6-8 tell of Timothy’s return and the rejuvenating effect this had on Paul and his associates. Timothy had a good report which declared the stability of the faith of the Thessalonians. The Apostle not only called this “good news,” the same word used of the gospel, but he said the real meaning of life for them was found in seeing believers become strong and firm in their stand in the Lord. What a heart for people and God’s purpose! What an illustration of true stability and other-centered living! Quite a contrast to the ‘me’ centered mentality of our day.

Here also we see Paul’s joy over the combined elements of faith and love for which he was thankful. Earlier he had combined faith, love, and hope (1:3). The point is that a stable, growing, and active faith will lead to acts of love. An active faith—one living in the light of the gospel and the person of God and His promises—will be productive in loving ministry for others. A person’s faith can be real, a genuine trust in Christ, but it can become dormant and unfocused and fundamentally unfruitful because of carnality or failure to walk and grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ (1 Cor. 3:3f.; Jam. 2:1f.; 2 Pet. 1:8-11).

The Prayer of the Apostle for the Thessalonians (3:9-13)

3:9 For how can we thank God enough for you, for all the joy we feel because of you before our God? **3:10** We pray earnestly night and day to see you in person and make up what may be lacking in your faith. **3:11** Now may God our Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. **3:12** And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we do for you, **3:13** so that your hearts are strengthened in holiness to be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

The Thanksgiving of the Apostle (vs. 9)

In Paul’s thanksgiving to God, we get another glimpse of the heart and perspective of the Apostle. He was a thankful servant, one who always lived with the perspective of God’s hand on his life. His heart was full of gratitude for the work of God in the lives of others. He recognized that coming to God in faith and changed lives was the work of God. He was but an instrument used of God. Here was a man who labored hard not because he was trusting in his hard labor, but because his faith was in the work of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10; Col. 2:27f.).

... Paul found words inadequate to express his appreciation for what had happened in their lives. The change in Paul’s mood was radical; “all our distress and persecution” (*pase te anagke kai thlipsei hemon*, 3:7) has now become “all the joy we have” (*pase te chara he chairomen*) because

of the steadfastness of the Thessalonians. His was no superficial happiness but heartfelt and sincere joy “in the presence of our God.”³

The Prayer of the Apostle (vs. 10a)

This section reminds us that teaching the Word and praying for the saints go together. Remember what Samuel, the prophet of the Word, told the people? Note there are two parts to Samuel’s statement: First, he said, “Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you.” But he was quick to add “but I will instruct you in the good and right way” (1 Sam. 12:23). Then, we read in Acts, “But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). We see the same emphasis with Paul. In Acts 20:32 he said, “And now, brethren, I commend you to God (the element of prayer), and to the Word of His grace which is able to build you up (the element of biblical instruction).”

Finally, we might note what our Lord said to Peter in Luke 22:31-32: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded *permission* to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” Teaching and even spending time with people is simply not enough; we desperately need to hold up the flock to the throne of grace.

Well, how did Paul and his associates pray for the Thessalonians? “Night and day” does not mean once at night and once in the morning nor does it mean that all night and all day they did nothing but pray. It means they prayed during the night and during the day, i.e., regularly, consistently, and in earnest.⁴ Their prayer life was not a haphazard affair. This illustrates the reality of their own faith, their dependence on the Lord, and the genuineness of their relationship with Him. They believed God was in charge and that He answered prayer.

Then we see they prayed “earnestly.” This is the Greek *uper-ek-perissou*, a triple compound word meaning “out of bounds, overflowing, super abundantly.” They worked hard at praying because they meant business with God and believed He answers prayer.

The Prayer Requests of the Apostle (vss. 10b-13)

(1) That they might see them and finish what was lacking in their faith (vs. 10)

There are two requests here, but they blend together into one purpose, which was the desire to see them grow and mature in the Lord. It seemed that this great objective colored all that he did. He loved people, but he knew the greatest blessing he could give them was spiritual growth and stability.

“Complete” is the Greek *karartizo*,. It means “to fit together or adjust, restore, repair, equip.” It was used of setting bones and repairing fishing nets (Mark 1:19). Compare also Hebrews 13:21; Luke 6:40; Galatians 6:1. Spiritually, it has the idea of making something what it ought to be, i.e., equipped for ministry, stable, sound doctrinally, Christ-like in character, etc.

“In your faith” points to the area to be made sound or to be equipped, repaired, or restored, as the need might be. But to what does “your faith” (literally, “of the faith of you”) refer? Some think it refers to “the faith” as the body of revealed truth (cf. Jude 3; Acts 6:7; 1 Co. 16:17; Eph. 4:13). Others think it refers to the personal faith of these believers as a synonym for their spiritual condition since one’s spiritual condition is usually related to the condition of one’s faith. While the personal pronoun “your” supports the latter view, we must bear in mind that one’s faith is always connected to one’s knowledge and application of the Word so they are ultimately related.

“What is lacking” is the Greek *hustere*,,ma, “deficiency, what is behind.” It brings out an important principle. Our faith and our knowledge, application, and faith in *the faith* never reaches a point of perfection. There is always room for improvement and growth. No one ever arrives, not even the Apostle himself (Phil. 3:12-16; Eph. 4:13; 1 Pe. 2:2; 2 Pe. 3:18). Faith, as we are told in Romans 1:17, must grow from “faith to faith.”

³ Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

⁴ The use of the genitive case here with night and day makes it clear Paul was talking about the kind of time, “during or within a period of time, i.e., during the night and the day. If Paul had used the accusative case, it would refer to the extent of the time of the verbal action, how long, i.e., all day and all night.

By way of application this would stress several things for us.

- It doesn't matter how much I know or apply, there is always room for more growth and greater insight. Being puffed up or proud in my knowledge or its application is a sign of carnality or immaturity or both (1 Cor. 8:1-2). We all need a humble and teachable spirit.
- We each need to keep studying and pressing on to know the Word better and to apply it more accurately and consistently (2 Tim. 2:15; Jam. 1:19-27).
- We also need, like Paul, to be concerned about what is lacking in the lives of other believers. We need to be available to pray and work to help others grow in their faith as disciple makers, which is at the heart of the great commission (Matt. 28:19-20).

(2) That God might remove the obstacles to their return (vs. 11)

Verse 11 reminds us of several important principles, but first, the words, “direct our way unto you,” are very instructive.

“Direct” is the Greek *kat-euthuno*,, “to make or keep straight, straighten out, direct, guide.” If we remember 2:18, we see the Apostle was praying for the removal of the obstacles placed in their way by Satan. So we are reminded of the battle going on to hinder the work of the Lord and of our need of God's direction and protection. Paul was praying for guidance and opened doors.

The translation, “may ... direct” represents the optative mood in the Greek text, which expresses a strong wish, often used in prayers. “God our Father Himself” points us to the focus of their prayer. “Himself” is emphatic in the Greek. It shows how Paul knew the fulfillment of his wish, as with everything, is in God's hands. The inclusion of “and Father” points to Paul's reliance on the fatherly care of God. They were casting this longing to be with the Thessalonians on the Lord and entrusting it to God's wisdom and sovereignty.

Paul recognizes the uselessness of personal efforts toward a revisit unless God “clears the way.” At the moment, the path of return is untravelable (cf. 2:18), but Paul prays for the removal of the barriers.⁵

Finally, the inclusion of “and Jesus our Lord” is a strong affirmation of the deity of Christ. The verb is singular, but the subject is plural, the Father and Jesus. The Lord Jesus is associated with God the Father as the controller of the affairs of men and the powers of Satan. Regarding this point, Robert L. Thomas has an excellent comment here:

Two persons viewed as one (cf. John 10:30) possess power to open the way to Thessalonica once again; “our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus” is the compound subject of a singular verb (*kateuthunai*, “may [He] clear”)—probably an indication of the unity of the Godhead (Ellicott, p. 46). Even if the deity of Jesus is not to be seen in such a grammatical feature (Best, p. 147), it must be understood, since only God is worthy to be addressed in prayer.⁶

(3) That the Lord might cause them to abound in love (vs. 12)

Continuing the use of the optative to express their desire for spiritual growth through the trials the Thessalonians were facing, Paul prays that they might continue to increase and abound in love. Regarding this desire Wiersbe writes:

Times of suffering can be times of selfishness. Persecuted people often become very self-centered and demanding. What life does to us depends on what life finds in us; and nothing reveals the true inner man like the furnace of affliction. Some people build walls in times of trial and shut themselves off. Others build bridges and draw closer to the Lord and His people. This was Paul's prayer for these believers, and God answered it: “the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth” (2 Thes. 1:3).⁷

⁵ Gaebelien, electronic media.

⁶ Gaebelien, electronic media.

⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 67.

Scripture makes it very clear that one of the chief marks of a Christian is love—or should be (John 15:12-17). Thus, in our walk with the Lord, as we grow in faith, we should also to be growing in our love for one another (1 John 4:7-13).

(4) That He might establish their hearts unblamable in holiness at the coming of the Lord, the rapture followed by the Bema, the Judgment Seat of Christ (vs. 13)

The holiness spoken of here is not positional holiness or positional sanctification that comes to the believer at salvation, nor is it the perfect condition of believers before the Lord after glorification and translation when we receive our glorified bodies. Rather, this is experiential. Positional sanctification is a part of our salvation and a gift given at the moment of faith in Christ. The Apostle would not pray for positional sanctification since that is an accomplished fact (see 1 Cor. 1:2 with 1:8 and vs. 29-30, which refer to the believer's position in Christ). In 1 Corinthians, Paul was writing to a carnal and divisive church, yet he declares they have been and are sanctified in Christ.

Further, “Since all believers will be transformed to be like Christ when He returns (1 John 3:2), Paul could not be referring to their personal condition in heaven.”⁸ However, one of God's objectives for all believers is **experiential sanctification** or change into the character of Jesus Christ so that when we stand before the Lord at the Bema or Judgment Seat of Christ, we will be blameless (not sinless or faultless experientially) and will be able to receive rewards for faithful service.

There is an important connection between verses 12 and 13. Verse 13 begins with “so that” which introduces it as a result clause (The Greek has *eis to* + the infinitive to express intended result.). This is a further request, but one which is also a result of the preceding request.

As believers grow in their faith, and as their hearts are strengthened in love, their inner life is stabilized or strengthened with the result their inner motives and desires become more and more pure and blameless before the Lord. We will never face our sins in heaven, for they are remembered no more (Rom. 8:1; Heb. 10:14-18), but our works will be tested as to their quality. Are they the results of the work of the Spirit, or the product of selfish motives (cf. Gal. 5:16f.; 1 Cor. 4:1-5)?

Before God they should be **holy**, separated to **God** in their hearts and habits. Paul longed that when Jesus Christ would return He would find them blameless before men and holy before God.⁹

“With all His saints” is *hagioi*, the plural of *hagios*, “holy, set apart.” Literally it means “holy ones,” or “set apart ones.” Though some would refer this to the angels who will accompany the return of Christ (cf. Mark 8:38, “holy angels”), in this context and with emphasis on the return of the Lord for believers in 1 Thessalonians it more likely refers to all who are His—all New Testament believers of the church age who have died and will return with the Lord, those spoken of in the rapture passage in 4:16. Of course some refer Paul's statement to both angels and believers.¹⁰ This is unlikely, however, as expressed by Thomas in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*:

Others present at this reckoning will be “all his holy ones.” Their identity has been variously taken either as that of angels or of redeemed human beings, or both angels and redeemed human beings. The last possibility can be eliminated in that Paul would hardly include two such diverse groups in the same category. That angels alone are meant is unlikely in light of NT usage of *hagioi* (“holy ones”). Universally in Paul and perhaps the entire NT Jude 14 is debatable; it is a term for redeemed humanity, though usage in LXX and later Jewish literature differs. The redeemed are

⁸ Wiersbe, p. 69.

⁹ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983, 1985, electronic media.

¹⁰ ... **with all his saints**—including both the holy angels and the holy elect of men (1 Th 4:14; Da 7:10; Zec 14:5; Mt 25:31; 2 Th 1:7) (Robert Jamieson; A. R. Fausset; and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998). **Saints**. Literally, *holy ones*. It probably includes holy angels as well as dead believers clothed in bodies “not made with hands” (II Cor 5:1), awaiting the resurrection of their earthly bodies. For other graphic pictures of Christ's coming with his whole heavenly entourage see Mt 24:30, 31 and Rev 19:11-14 (Everett F. Harrison, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Moody Press, Chicago 1962, electronic media).

elsewhere associated with Christ at his return (2 Thess 1:10). Since human beings are the objects of judgment and their holiness is what is in focus (cf. “blameless and holy”), it is entirely appropriate to identify “the holy ones” as other Christian people joined with the Thessalonian Christians before the *bema* of God and Christ.¹¹

Thomas L. Constable in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* agrees:

The **holy ones** accompanying Christ at His coming are probably the souls of the saints who have departed this life and gone to be with Christ, whose bodies will be resurrected when He comes (4:16). That is, they are Christians rather than angels.¹²

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter the author has shown us a number of causes for concern that all Christians face in various ways and degrees as members of the body of Christ. So there is the need for growth and the strengthening of faith, but there is also the constant activity of Satan who is always working to hinder God’s work through and in His saints. In this chapter, we have also found directions for how to strengthen believers so that those things that can hinder one’s faith—like suffering, Satan’s activity, and one’s need of growth—are neutralized in their effect. In this, God uses four key elements: (1) the work of faithful servants who have a deep faith in the Lord and a loving concern for people, (2) fervent prayer, (3) the knowledge of God’s truth, especially as it relates to suffering, to properly appraise the trials of life, and (4) living confidently in view of the coming of the Savior for His church. So once again in this epistle, we see not only a confident expectation in the second coming and the Lord’s return for His church, but how our hope in the return of the Lord is to be a constant motivation for growth and faithful service.

¹¹ Gaebelien, electronic media.

¹² Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

Lesson 7: The Call to Holiness (1 Thess. 4:1-12)

Introduction

In many of his epistles, the Apostle begins with a doctrinal section followed by a practical and exhortational section concerned with the Christian walk or how Christians should live. In this epistle, rather than beginning with doctrine, there is a personal and historical section in which he demonstrates his thanksgiving for the Thessalonians, reviews his ministry, and shows his deep concern for them in their sufferings and present state. However, with chapter four, the Apostle moves to a series of exhortations which deal with the Christian walk.

Paul begins this section (4:1) with “finally then.” “Finally” is the Greek particle *loipon*, a particle of transition often found toward the end of a letter. It means “for the rest,” not necessarily implying that he was ending the letter, but marking a transition in the subject matter (see Phil. 3:1). Paul turns from their thanksgiving and prayer for the Thessalonians to the exhortations needed for this body of believers in view of Timothy’s report.

“Then” is *oun*, a coordinating, inferential conjunction meaning, “therefore, consequently, then.” What is now introduced is the result or an inference from the preceding. Just as the missionaries had prayed earnestly for the faith and spiritual growth of the Thessalonians, so now Paul exhorts them, in keeping with those prayers, to holiness in their daily walk.

God is deeply concerned with our daily walk, with how we live the Christian life. The Lord came not just to make us children of God and get us into heaven, but to enable us to live as the children of God ought to live in a dark and sinful world that does not know Him.

This final portion of the book, then, falls into five major sections: (1) The *Call* to Holiness (4:1-12); (2) The *Comfort* of His Coming (4:13-18); (3) The *Comfort and Challenge* Concerning the Day of the Lord (5:1-11); (4) The *Conduct* of the Assembly (5:12-22); and (5) The *Concluding* Remarks (5:23-28).

The immediate section, 4:1-8, was particularly necessary in view of the cultural background of the Thessalonians. In contrast to the Jews who had the Law, these Gentiles had come out of gross idolatry which had little or no restraint on their moral character especially in matters of sex. In fact, prostitution was a very prominent part of their religious life since the worship of the so called gods involved the use of temple prostitutes. The moral climate in the Roman Empire was morally decadent. “Immorality was a way of life; and, thanks to slavery, people had the leisure time to indulge in the latest pleasures. The Christian message of holy living was new to that culture, and it was not easy for these young believers to fight the temptations around them.”¹

Especially in view of the moral climate that has developed in this country in the last 40 years, William Barclay has a significant comment about conditions in Rome. He writes:

In Rome, for the first five hundred and twenty years of the Republic, there had not been one single divorce; but now, under the Empire, as it has been put, divorce was a matter of caprice. As Seneca said, “Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married.” In Rome the years were identified by the names of the consuls; but it was said that fashionable ladies identified the years by the names of their husbands. Juvenal quotes an instance of a woman who had eight husbands in five years. Morality was dead.²

Pointing to the fact that in Greece immorality had always been quite blatant, Barclay also quotes Demonsthenes who said:

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 72.

² William Barclay, *The Letters to The Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, First Edition, 1957, p.231.

We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately, and of having a faithful guardian for all our household affairs.

... In Greece, home and family life were near to being extinct, and fidelity was completely non-existent.³

The Greek gods which the ancient world worshipped and the debauchery that accompanied such worship were simply the products of man's own vain imaginations or their foolish and darkened hearts (see Rom. 1:8f.; Eph. 4:17f.). These gods were half human, half god, and as immoral as the hearts that hatched them, which gave them (in their debased perspective) a license to act according to their own fleshly desires. Their consciences became dull and hardened and the law of the conscience had little effect. The Psalmist declares, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Ps. 33:12a), but the opposite always occurs when nations either ignore the Lord or turn away from Him, as we see happening in our country today.

But, through the gospel of the Lord Jesus, God comes into our lives, regardless of our condition or culture, joins us into union with Him through faith in the Savior, and begins a reformation movement to transform us into the moral character of the Savior. This occurs as His life is lived out in ours by the Holy Spirit according to the Word. This is not a matter of simply changing cultural patterns like Westernizing natives, but changing the spiritual and moral fiber of men and women. God, who is holy, is deeply concerned with our walk.

As a result, a number of passages like 1 Thessalonians 4:1 address the concept of the believer's walk. The Christian life is compared to walking. Walking becomes a visual aid to teach us how to live. By means of walking we move from one sphere to another; we seek to carry out certain responsibilities at work, at home, in the church, and in society. We do many things, some good and some not so good. But walking also means taking one step at a time, and with each step, while one foot is off the ground as we move forward, we are susceptible to being knocked off balance, to stumbling, or stepping into trouble.

In verse one, the Apostle speaks of "how you must live (literally, "walk")." The Greek word here is *peripateo*, from *peri*, "about, around," and *pateo*, "to walk." It portrays one walking about in all the various areas or arenas of life. Because of the emphasis of this passage, an addendum is included at the end of this lesson with an overview of some of the key passages on the believer's walk.

The General Exhortation (4:1-2)

4:1 Finally then, brothers and sisters, we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received instruction from us about how you must live and please God (as you are in fact living) that you do so more and more. **4:2** For you know what commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Verses 1 and 2 form a gentle and general reminder of the previous instruction they had received from Paul and his associates concerning how they should live and please God. In the word "live" (literally, "walk") the emphasis is on *actions*, and in the words "please God" the emphasis is on *motives*.

The nature, strength, and emotion of this appeal is seen in the use of two terms, "we ask" and "urge." The verb "we ask" is the Greek *ero,tao*, which is normally used between those who are of equal rank or status. It is the only word used by the Lord Jesus in His prayers to the Father (see John 14:16; 16:26; 17:9, 15, 20). Paul was appealing to them as fellow believers in the Savior. "Urge" is *parakaleo*, "appeal to, exhort, encourage" (see as previously discussed in 2:12). This word is somewhat more emphatic and formal, especially with the words, "in the Lord Jesus" attached. On their behalf, as a fellow believer, he makes his appeal, but he exhorts them by the Lord Jesus. This draws attention to the great importance of following both the previous instruction and that which would follow.

"That as you received instruction from us about how you must live and please God ..." This reminder of their former instruction draws our attention to several practical lessons:

(1) After these missionaries led their converts to the Lord, they also began to teach them how to live and please God. They laid a doctrinal foundation and then taught them the moral obligations of that doctrine. This was Paul's practice and forms a precedent for us: first **doctrine**, then **duty**; **precept** and then **practice**. Doctrine should

³ Barclay, p. 231.

lead to godly practice, but a godly practice that is in keeping with God's Word as to its character and the means (root to fruit). Learning to live and please God is a matter of biblical instruction. It is neither natural nor innate. Without the Word, there is simply no way any of us are going to be able to walk as we should so we are able to please the Lord (Col. 2:6). Over and over again in the Old Testament we read that God's people are to walk in His ways, statutes, and laws, i.e., according to the Word (Lev. 26:3; Deut. 5:33; 8:6; 10:12; Josh. 22:5).

(2) Further, this is not an optional issue. Paul says "how you must live." "Must" is *dei*, which refers to a logical and moral necessity, one which arises out of the divine constraint or the nature of the relationship involved, an inner compulsion that grows out of the situation. For a commentary on this principle one only needs to consider Titus 2:11-14 and 1 John 3:1-3.

(3) Living or walking as we ought to walk means pleasing the Lord. The Apostle may have in mind Genesis 5:22. There the Hebrew has "Enoch walked with God," while the Septuagint (LXX) has "Enoch pleased God." In Hebrews 11:5, the LXX is quoted. Here Paul seems to combine the two concepts.⁴ To please God, we must walk with Him in the light of His Word.⁵

(4) The Apostle adds, "even as you are walking" to assure them that he is not insinuating they have not been walking as they should. We all need growth and to be on guard against the temptations of world around us.

(5) Thus, the Apostle continues with, "that you do so more and more." Literally, "that you may abound or excel more and more." Paul uses the verb *perisseuo*, "to be over and above, overflow, abound, excel." To this he adds the adverb, *mallon*, "to a greater degree." The goal of Paul's plea concerns the believer's daily walk in the pursuit of excellence and increase, or progress in the daily life of holiness, set apart living to the Lord (cf. vss. 1 and 10). This means being stretched and that means becoming uncomfortable. Too often we are simply concerned with keeping the status quo and we shrink from commitments that might stretch us.

There are serious consequences for failure to follow God's directions. When men and nations refuse, God turns them over to their own devices and the schemes of their own hearts (Ps. 81:12-13; Rom. 1:18f.; Eph. 4:16f.).

The emphasis in verse two on the commandments by the authority of the Lord Jesus would add a further emphasis to show that none of this is optional if we are to please God. In fact, to stress the imperative nature of our walk and pleasing God, the Apostle will later give three reasons for obedience in verses 6b-8.

It seems that far too often some Christians just want to hear new truth. Certainly, God wants us to grow in the knowledge of His Word, but we also need the exhortation to excel still more in the truth we know; our goal should be to press on to greater and greater appropriation of the truths which we already know and are already practicing, but to only a limited degree.

The Exhortation to Sexual Purity (4:3-8)

4:3 For this is God's will: for you to become holy, for you to keep away from sexual immorality, **4:4** for each of you to know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, **4:5** not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God. **4:6** In this matter no one should violate the rights of his brother or take advantage of him, because the Lord is the avenger in all these cases, as we also told you earlier and warned you solemnly. **4:7** For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. **4:8** Consequently the one who rejects this is not rejecting human authority but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

The general exhortation of verses 1-2 is now followed by specific instructions. Verse 3 begins with "for" (Greek *gar*, a conjunction of explanation or continuation) to introduce the needed exhortations, especially in view of the cultural background of the Thessalonians. The first has to do with sexual purity (vss. 3-8), the second with brotherly love (vss. 9-10), and the third with orderly living (vss. 11-12).

⁴ C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians With Notes Exegetical and Expository*, Pickering Inglis LTD, London, 1914, p. 111.

⁵ For a brief overview on key passages and principles dealing with pleasing the Lord, see the study entitled, *Pleasing the Lord*, on our web site in the "Bible Studies / Spiritual life" section.

The walk that pleases God is first defined with the words, “the will of God,” and then as “your sanctification.” With the statement, “This is the will of God,” Paul brings into focus the constant battle and a key issue going on in the hearts of men. “Will” is thele,,ma, “what is willed.” It points to the sovereign will and plan of God for the Christian. But all men by nature tend to follow the desires, thele,,mata, of the flesh and mind which are opposed to the will of God (see Eph. 2:3) and which can never please God (Rom. 8:8). It is not that all of those desires are evil, for many of them are God given. Sex is not evil. From the beginning God created marriage as a sacred union between one man and one woman and sex was to be a part of that union for the continuance of the race and for pleasure in marriage. What makes many of man’s desires (thele,,mata) evil is his self-centered commitment to follow those desires contrary to God’s will (as in adultery) and at the expense or exploitation of others. The specifics of God’s will are clearly set forth in many places in Scripture, even though Christians often seem to have a great deal of difficulty applying it in everyday decision-making (cf. 5:16-18; 1 Peter 2:15). Nevertheless, Paul describes this in general terms as “your sanctification.”

“Sanctification” is the Greek *hagiasmos*, from *hagiazō*,, “to set apart, consecrate, dedicate, sanctify.” Taking the New Testament as a whole, there are three aspects and phases of sanctification: (1) *positional* or *past*, a position of being set apart to God in Christ, which every believer has at the moment of his salvation (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11); (2) *progressive* or *present*, a progressive growth in holiness of life that ought to be true of every believer (1 Cor. 1:30; 1 Thess. 4:3), and (3) *prospective—ultimate* or *future*, the believer’s future condition in heaven, when believers will be “without blame” (3:13). In this passage the Apostle is clearly dealing with the issue of present or progressive sanctification.

But Paul does not leave this in just general terms. That which is the will of God, or our pursuit in present sanctification, is spelled out in three appositional infinitive clauses in the Greek text that give examples of what sanctification means.⁶ This is easily seen in the “that” clauses of the NIV and NASB in verses 3b, 4, and 6. The translation of the NIV is given below to illustrate.

It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: *that* you should avoid sexual immorality; *that* each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and *that* in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. (NIV)

The Three Instructions (vss. 3b-6a)

Abstain From Immorality (vs. 3b)

“... for (that) you to keep away (avoid, abstain) from sexual immorality ...” The first instruction is general and is designed to produce greater holiness through avoiding sexual immorality. Paul called his readers to avoid it, pointing to the need for exercising self-discipline as enabled by God’s Spirit (as the end of this section suggest in vs. 8).

“Keep away from” is *apecho*,, “to hold back, keep off, be distant.” In the middle voice as used here, it means “to hold oneself from, avoid.” The middle voice draws attention to the subject’s personal participation in the action on himself with vested interest. This stresses personal responsibility along with the benefits that will result in pleasing God and protecting ourselves from sin and avoiding its consequences (see 4:6-8).

The word *porneia*, translated “sexual immorality,” is broad and includes all forms of illegitimate sexual practices. Bruce writes,

⁶ In verse 6, the construction to *mh %uperbainein* has caused some discussion and disagreement about how we should understand this infinitive because of the article with the negative particle (to *mh*). Some (F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word, Waco, 1982, p. 81; James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1912, pp. 151-152) believe this should be seen as a purpose clause in the sense of the infinitive used with *tou mh* or *%wste*, but others like Blass and Debrunner (F. Blass and A Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961, pp. 205-206) consider it as a substantivized infinitive used loosely with *mh*. A. T. Robertson likewise sees it as the substantival/apositional use of the infinitive (pp. 1059, 1078).

While porneia means primarily traffic with harlots (pornai), ... it may denote any form of illicit sexual relationship. But “immorality” is too vague a rendering. In some New Testament passages porneia appears to have a more general sense. Christianity from the outset has sanctified sexual union within marriage (as in Judaism); outside marriage it was forbidden. This was a strange notion in the pagan society to which the gospel was first brought; there various forms of extramarital sexual union were tolerated and some were even encouraged. A man might have a mistress (he,,taira) who could provide him also with intellectual companionship; the institution of slavery made it easy for him to have a concubine (pollake,,), while casual gratification was readily available from a harlot (porne,,). ... There was no body of public opinion to discourage porneia, ... Certain forms of public religion, indeed, involved ritual porneia. In Thessalonica it was sanctioned by the cult of Cabiri of Samothrace, ...⁷

Thus, by calling for believers to keep away from fornication, Paul had in mind all the particular social conditions to which these believers were susceptible in Greece stemming from their past history as idolaters. The Thessalonians lived in a pagan environment in which sexual looseness was not only practiced openly but was also encouraged. As Bruce has pointed out, in Greek religion, prostitution was considered a priestly prerogative, and extramarital sex was sometimes an act of worship. But to a Christian the will of God is clear: holiness and sexual immorality are mutually exclusive. No appeal to Christian liberty can justify fornication.

Point: Christians are to avoid and abstain from any and every form of sexual practice that lies outside the circle of God’s revealed will; Christians are to avoid **adultery, premarital and extramarital intercourse, homosexuality, and other perversions.**

Know How to Possess Your Vessel (vss. 4-5)

In these verses, the Apostle moves from the general to the specific and from the **positive** to the **negative**. A great deal of debate exists regarding the meaning of verse 4 with two interpretations being prominent. The debate concerns the meaning of “vessel” (*skeuos*). Taking “vessel” to refer figuratively to one’s own body, some interpret verse 4 to mean, “learn how to control one’s own body with its sexual passions since our own bodies are our vessels (2 Cor. 4:7; 2 Tim. 2:20-21). How to do this is not explained by the Apostle. “Know” is an infinitive of *oida* in Greek which may refer to knowledge learned from the Word or the revelation of God. This would be a command to learn and apply what God’s Word says about self-control of one’s body and sexual urges through the control of the Spirit (vs. 8) and the Word filled life.

But a second and equally prominent view (as suggested by the NET Bible’s translation) holds this clause to mean that believers are to learn how to acquire a wife or husband⁸ and live with one’s spouse in the sanctity of marriage. In this view, the verse is dealing with one’s approach to and maintenance of the marriage relationship according to the teaching of Scripture.

Of course, both aspects are important to believers, but perhaps there is stronger support for the second view because of the following reasons:

(1) “Possess” is the Greek *ktaomai* which, in every occurrence in the New Testament, is used in the sense of “acquire, purchase for oneself, or gain.” Compare Luke 18:12; 21:19; Matthew 10:9; Acts 1:18; 8:20; 22:28. In none of these passages is this word used in the sense of “get control over or mastery over.”

⁷ Bruce, p. 82.

⁸ Since Peter uses “vessel” (*skeuos*) of the wife as “the weaker vessel,” this means the husband is also a vessel, though generally the stronger one physically. With this in mind, perhaps vessel should not be limited to the wife. However, because of the cultural conditions described earlier in this lesson with men having hetairai, mistresses or courtesans, and their slaves as pallakai, concubines, Paul undoubtedly had men in mind, primarily unmarried, but this is certainly applicable to married men as well. The apostle was writing to a specific cultural problem, but certainly the principles are applicable for both men and women in any society.

(2) By contrast, *ktaomai* was frequently used of courtship and contracting a marriage, i.e., acquiring a wife (cf. LXX uses *kataomai* in Ruth 4:5, 10). Because of this, Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich chose “acquire a wife” as the most probable meaning, and the NET Bible and the RSV translates it accordingly.⁹

(3) “Vessel,” *skeuos*, is used of any instrument, object or thing used for any purpose. It is used (1) of vessels in religious worship (temple vessels), (2) of men as instruments of the Lord (Acts 9:15; 2 Cor. 4:7), and (3) of husband and wife as vessels (1 Pet. 3:7). That 1 Peter 3:7 includes the husband is clear by the term “weaker.” In general, he is the stronger and she is the weaker physically speaking.

So, we do have a biblical basis for using “vessel” for a marriage partner and for using *kataomai* in the sense of contracting a marriage (Ruth 4). Further, it was used of women in rabbinical literature.

(4) Clearly, one way to avoid sexual impurity is through marriage and a proper understanding of sex and marriage as God designed it. This is particularly true for Paul’s audience due to the cultural climate of Greece. This does not depreciate a woman’s position in marriage as just a vessel to satisfy sexual desires as verses 4b-5 illustrate, and because, in the final analysis, the principles are applicable to both men and women in their approach to marriage.

Verse 4b then points us to positive biblical attitude that must guard and guide one’s approach into marriage, “in holiness and honor.” Then verse 5 warns against the wrong goal that must not be the objective of marriage.

With the clause, “in holiness and honor,” the preposition “in” (Greek *en*) points us to the sphere or controlling atmosphere that is to surround, control, and guide the process of courtship, entrance into and maintenance of the marriage relationship whether man or woman.

As mentioned previously, “holiness” or “sanctification” basically means “set apartness,” a state of “holiness.” It refers to the progressive aspect of sanctification, the process of being set apart to the Lord and His purposes and plan. Marriage must be entered and maintained by the principles of Scripture. Scripture sets marriage apart from the motives, ideas, and values of a world that “does not know God” (vs. 5).

“Honor” is time, which means “a valuing, a price paid or received,” then “esteem, preciousness, respect.” Marriage must be entered and maintained in an atmosphere of respect for it is a special and holy creation and institution of God. It is not just a convenience or a means of power or position or an excuse for sex. It is a life-long commitment of two people committed to ministry and love wherein they seek to complement and complete each other.

Having stressed the positive, the Apostle then turned now to the negative focus in verse 5: “not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God.”

Such behavior is a mark of heathenism. A heathen is one who “does not know God.” Here Paul put his finger on the key to overcoming sexual temptations. A Christian can overcome because he knows God; this makes all the difference!¹⁰

Simply put, believers are never to enter into marriage, as the unbelieving world does, simply because of passionate lust (*en pathēi epithumias*). “Passionate” is *pathos* and refers to what one suffers or experiences as in suffering, like the passion of Christ, or of sexual passion. “Lust” is *epithumia*, “desire, longing, craving.” Sexual desire is God given and is not wrong. One only has to read the Song of Solomon, a love poem of sexual love and passion within marriage, to see God’s blessing on sex in marriage. It only becomes wrong when it controls one’s life and goes beyond the limits of the marriage relationship in which there is personal commitment to each partner for life.

We should note that Paul did not say the heathen do not know about God. The reason, they behave as they do is because they do not know God personally, even though they may know about Him. When a person comes to know God by faith in Jesus Christ, not only should his attitudes toward sex and marriage drastically change, as he gains a knowledge of the Word, but he also discovers that God gives him the ability to handle sexual temptation as he couldn’t before. Knowing God intimately is fundamental to living a life in sanctification and honor. This is why both

⁹ Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

¹⁰ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983, 1985, electronic media.

having relationship with God (through faith in Christ) and maintaining a close walk with Him (through daily intimate fellowship) is vital to having and keeping a pure walk before God.

Do Not Trespass and Defraud a Brother (vs. 6a)

“In this matter no one should violate the rights of his brother or take advantage of him, ...” As mentioned previously,¹¹ this verse begins with another infinitive which may be setting forth a third explanation of the clause, “this is the will of God, your sanctification” (vs. 3a), or it might possibly be introducing the purpose or intended results of following the instruction of verses 3-5. Ryrie writes: “Verse 6 is probably to be understood as the result of obedience to the injunctions of verses 3 and 4. If fornication is abstained from, no man will go beyond his brother.”¹²

Whether Paul intended the two infinitives here¹³ introduced with “to me,,” to be understood as expressing purpose or result, or simply as appositional to “this is the will of God, your sanctification,” the end result is that verse 6 does give us the intended result of obedience. A biblical approach to marriage and sex according to these instructions will keep one from violating the rights and taking advantage of others in the matter of sex and marriage.

Thus, in 4:4-5, Paul made his appeal on the basis of the importance of sexual purity for the sake of obedience to God’s will (vs. 3), and for the Christian’s own spiritual benefit and that of his or her marriage. In verse 6 Paul made his appeal on the basis of the others involved in immoral behavior.

But who is “the brother”? Typically, the Apostle uses “brother” as a term for believers, but due to the context, many see “the brother” in this verse as most likely another person, not necessarily another Christian male. “This seems clear from the fact that this person is a victim of illicit sex. Sexual immorality wrongs the partner in the forbidden act by involving him or her in behavior contrary to God’s will and therefore under His judgment.”¹⁴ Ryrie agrees though he acknowledges this is not the Apostle’s normal use of “brother.” He writes, “Paul uses “brother” here not in the restricted sense of a brother in Christ but in the general sense of a brother man. There is no other instance in Paul’s writings of this use of brother.”¹⁵ Paul’s point is that just as stealing is a sin against one’s neighbor, so sexual immorality is a transgression against others.

Three Reasons for Obedience—Why Sexual Immorality Must Be Avoided (vss. 6b-8)

(1) The first reason is set forth, God is avenger of all sin (see Rom. 6:23a), and sexual fornication is sin. In the context, “in all these cases” or “in all such things (sins)” refers to all the various forms of sexual sin not specifically described here, but covered by the general term “sexual immorality” or “fornication.” Sexual sin will not go unpunished. It has its immediate consequences in the personal discipline of God on the believer who transgresses and on a society which ignores the laws of God. The tremendous effect of this can be seen on the home and in the transmission of sexually-transmitted diseases so prevalent in our world today. But there is also the future aspect of loss of rewards for those believers who ignore God’s truth.

2 Cor. 5:9-10. So then whether we are alive or away, we make it our ambition to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil.

With the words, “just as we also told you before and solemnly warned *you*,” the Apostle reminds them of their former instruction, instruction that came with a solemn warning. “Warned” is *diamarturomai*, “to solemnly warn, affirm solemnly, charge, warn.” This is a compound verb (*dia + marturomai*) and carries the idea of thoroughly.

Sexual immorality wrongs the partner in the forbidden act by involving him or her in behavior contrary to God’s will and therefore under His judgment. Two or more people practicing sex out of

¹¹ See the discussion in verse 3 and especially the quote by Barkley regarding Demonsthenes’ statement.

¹² Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1959, p. 6.

¹³ The two infinitives are *hyperbainein*, “go beyond, transgress, violate the rights,” and *pleonektein*, “defraud, overreach, take advantage of.”

¹⁴ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

¹⁵ Ryrie, p. 56.

God's will are calling God's wrath down on themselves (Heb. 13:4). The initiator of the act takes advantage of his partner in sin by fanning the fire of passion till self-control is lost ...

Everyone who fears the wrath of God should abstain from immorality because judgment follows such sin as surely as day follows night. That God always judges sin is a basic Christian truth which Paul had taught them and warned them about when he was in Thessalonica.¹⁶

(2) Verse 7 sets forth a second reason Christians must avoid sexual immorality. "For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness." Sexual sin clearly goes against God's calling for believers. In the previous reason of verse 6b, the Apostle focuses us on the sure prospect of God's judgment, but the second argument against sexual sin focuses us on the purpose and plan of God who has called each Christian into a life-changing, sanctifying relationship with Himself. This means purifying the believer's life from the degenerating behavior of a world that lives under Satan's dominion because it does not know God.

"Impurity" is the Greek *akatharsia*, "uncleanness, filthiness, impurity." It literally meant "refuse" and was used of the contents of graves. From this it came to be used of sexual sins. This gives us some idea of God's attitude toward such sin. "Sexual immorality frustrates the purpose of God's call. Certain pagan cults promoted unclean ceremonies, but Christ's plans for a Christian are to clean him up. A holy life demonstrates God's supernatural power at work overcoming what is natural, and it glorifies God."¹⁷

With the word, "holiness" the Apostle again called their attention to the general principle that must guide the believer's life. The noun used here is *hagiasmos* ("sanctification"), which occurs here for the fourth time in this epistle (cf. 3:13; 4:3-4) and the verb *hagiazō*, ["to sanctify"] is used in 5:23. God's will for believers is to set them apart from the mentality (viewpoint, aspirations, beliefs) and actions of a world that does not know God.

(3) The third reason Christians must avoid sexual immorality is set forth in verses 8, which really has two parts: (a) Sexual purity is grounded in the truth of God's revelation, and (b) God has provided the Holy Spirit as our enabler.

In this verse Paul drew a conclusion based on his preceding arguments. **First, sexual purity is grounded in the truth of God's holy revelation.** It is something which man normally will not arrive at on his own because of his own self-centered interest.

Greco-Roman ethics were based largely on the principles of self-interest and respect for another's property. The individual was expected to do what was to one's advantage, regardless of its effect on others, so long as one did not violate another person's property. When the Romans discuss morality, they use terms such as *duty*, *loyalty*, *prudence*, and *utility*. There were certain restrictions because of class and societal obligation, but no action in itself was immoral, except for incest, cannibalism, and murder of a blood relative, things taboo in almost every society anthropologists have studied.

Whereas most Christians today would define their sexual morality as based on religious teaching, the Greeks and Romans made no such connection. In the words of R. Flacelleire, "The domains of religion and sexual morality were then regarded as completely separate."¹⁸

"Consequently" is the translation of *toigaroun*, an emphatic compound particle introducing a sharp inference, "for that very reason, then, therefore." It occurs only here and in Hebrews 12:1 in the New Testament. Bruce points out that it is as emphatic in Hellenistic Greek as it was in classical Greek.¹⁹ "Rejects" and "rejecting" is *atheteō*, "to declare invalid, set aside, reject, not recognize." God has given plenty of evidence to validate the nature and uniqueness of the Bible as God's inspired and accurate Word. The issue is not a matter of poor evidence, but of blindness and hardness of heart. The problem is that men love darkness and refuse to come into the light as the Savior points out in John 3.

¹⁶ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

¹⁷ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

¹⁸ Albert A. Bell, Jr., *A Guide to the New Testament World*, Herald Press, Scottsdale, Penn., 1994, p. 222.

¹⁹ Bruce, p. 86.

John 3:19-20. Now this is the basis for judging: that the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. **3:20** For everyone who does evil deeds hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed.

The point is simply that God has not been silent; He has spoken and revealed His will in both the Old and New Testaments to protect man from himself and to bring him into a life-changing relationship with the living God. Sexual purity is simply a practical application of the basic truths of God's revelation and reveal His holy will.

Paul's attitudes toward sexual uncleanness did not arise from his background or personal preferences. They were the logical consequences of divine revelation. The Thessalonians and later readers of this epistle should realize that to reject these instructions is to reject the Person from whom they came originally, that is, God.²⁰

The second part of this third reason against sexual immorality is seen in the words, "who gives His Holy Spirit to you." The gift and ministry of the Holy Spirit, who is our enabler, is inseparable from the kind of holy living called for in these verses. Literally, the Greek has, "the Spirit of Him, the Holy one." The Greek word order places special emphasis on the character of the Spirit as "holy," the One given to enable us to be set apart to the will of God in sanctification and in honor.

Lest anyone feel that God is asking more than is reasonable of weak mortals, Paul concluded this exhortation with a reminder that God has also given believers His indwelling Spirit. This Person of the Trinity is so characterized by holiness that He is called the Holy Spirit. The indwelling Holy Spirit has power enough to enable any Christian to learn how to control his own body, even in a pagan, immoral climate. The exhortation is to avoid sexual immorality; the enablement comes from the Holy Spirit.²¹

Frame has an excellent comment here regarding the gift of the Spirit. He writes:

... Three points are evident in this appended characterization of God, each of them intimating a motive for obedience. (1) Not only is God the one who calls and judges, he is also the one who graciously puts into their hearts his Spirit whose presence insures their blamelessness in holiness when the Lord comes (3:13). In gratitude for this divine gift, they should be loyally obedient. (2) This indwelling Spirit is a power unto holiness, a consecrating Spirit. Devotion to God must consequently be ethical. (3) The Spirit is put not eis he,mas ... "into us Christians" collectively, but eis humas "into you" Thessalonians, specifically. Hence each of them is individually responsible to God who by the Spirit is resident in them. In despising, the individual despises not a man but God.²²

The Exhortation to Excel in Brotherly Love (4:9-10)

4:9 Now on the topic of brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. **4:10** And indeed you are practicing it toward all the brothers and sisters in all of Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more,

The phrase "now on the topic of" (*peri de*) is a frequent formula used by Paul to introduce a new subject (4:9; 5:1). He uses it some six times in 1 Corinthians (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12) to introduce his answers to the Corinthians' questions. He is probably using it in response to different elements brought back by Timothy in his report (3:6) regarding the conditions at Thessalonica.

In verses 1-2, we have a general exhortation as to how we ought to walk and please God, and by the process of growth to excel. From the general, the Apostle moved to the specific area of holiness of life in the realm of sexual

²⁰ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

²¹ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

²² Frame, p. 156.

purity (vss. 3-8). Now the transition from sexual purity to brotherly love is a natural one. We see a similar emphasis and relationship in 3:12-13.

3:12 And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we do for you, **3:13** so that your hearts are strengthened in holiness to be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Sexual sins, regardless of their nature, are self-centered and usually involve the exploitation and use of another for selfish reasons. Even though sexual sins are couched in terms of love by society, they are really acts of self love (vs. 6).

“Brotherly love” is *philadelphia* from *philos* or *philia*. It refers to a friendship love, a deep affection as in close friendships and in marriage. The other part is *adelphos*, which means “brother.” It refers to the kind of love and affection that should exist, not because of physical birth, or nationality, or secular alliances, but because of our spiritual relationship as brethren in Christ and children of God through faith in Christ.

By way of application, regardless of personality differences and conflicts, all believers should be bound together in warmth and concern for each other because of their relationship in Christ. Brothers in Christ are often closer than blood brothers because of their spiritual bond and oneness of mind in the Lord (see Phil. 2:1-5).

“You have no need . . . , for you are taught by God to love one another.” “Taught by God” is *theodidaktoi* (pl), a term found only here in the New Testament (cf. *didaktoi theou* in John 6:45). But what does this mean? Is the Apostle saying we don’t need biblical instruction on loving one another? Obviously not because the New Testament has so much to say on this subject and because the church is often so poor at loving.

The sense Paul has in mind seems to be that we are God-taught to love one another in two ways: (1) By the example given to us by the Father in sending His Son (1 John 4:9-11, 19), and (2) through the continuing inward ministry of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us (vs. 8; Gal. 5:22; 2 Cor. 5:14). “Deeper than human language can reach, God Himself speaks to the believer’s heart.”²³

The phrase, “to love one another” is an important one for two reasons. First, because it reiterates one of the primary commands of the New Testament. This command is repeated thirteen times in the New Testament²⁴ and is to be the badge of our identity as disciples of the Lord. Our Lord said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). The second reason is because this phrase takes the concept of *philadelphia*, brotherly love, and lifts it to new heights. Love in this phrase is agape, which is a sacrificial love, a love produced by the Spirit, and a love that reaches out to the unlovable or even to one’s enemies, those who need our forgiveness just as we all need God’s forgiveness.

With verse 10, the Apostle confirms his comments in verse 9. Note the “and indeed” (*kai gar*). They were already living examples of loving one another; they had been showing love toward all the brethren in Macedonia. How, he does not say, but probably through hospitality as an expression of love frequently urged in Scripture (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:9). Furthermore, this verse shows the extent of love. Love is to extend to all the brethren and not just to a few with whom one might have special rapport. It should be limited only by the opportunities afforded to express it.

Once again in keeping with the need for continued growth, he urged them to excel. As before, “to excel still more” is literally, “to abound more.” For comments on this, see verse 1. No matter how much we love, due to the very nature of love and the difficulties with loving, there is always room for improvement in our capacity to love both in quantity and quality.

We don’t need anyone to tell us to love since we are taught of God, but because of the devastating effects of the fall, even as regenerated people, we do need reminders and biblical instruction on how to deal with the forces in our own hearts that are so debilitating to our ability to love—our fears, our self-protective strategies for dealing with our hurts, our lack of maturity, and our failure to reckon with our own sinfulness. Because of this, we often simply do not love as we should.

²³ Hogg and Vine, p. 122.

²⁴ John 13:34; 15:12, 17; Romans 13:8; 1 Thess. 4; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 5.

We might compare Paul's prayer for the Philippians (Phil. 1:9). Here the Apostle prays that love may abound still more and more, but the additional clause, "in real knowledge and all discernment," is tremendously instructive. "Real knowledge" is *epignosis*, a word which often refers specifically to biblical truth or the knowledge of God and the spiritual things of God. "Discernment" is *aisthesis*, which refers to spiritual insight, perception denoting moral and spiritual understanding of the issues involved (cf. Phil. 1:10-11). Love needs the wisdom of the Word along with a personal relationship with the Lord, the fruit of righteousness by Jesus Christ, so we can make loving and wise choices and not simply sentimental choices which are so often simply selfish.

See Addendum 2 at the end of this lesson for some principles on "love" and "loving the brethren."

The Exhortation to Walk in an Orderly Manner (4:11-12)

4:11 and to aspire to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, as we commanded you. **4:12** In this way you will live a decent life before outsiders and not be in need.

If you will notice, verse 11 is connected to the preceding section and the exhortation to excel in love with a simple connective, "and," (the Greek *kai*, a coordinating conjunction, "and, even, also"). These verses stand in close grammatical and logical connection with the preceding. While there is a change in emphasis, what we have in these next two verses is actually a further application of the responsibility to excel in love through walking in a biblical and orderly fashion. Hard work and individual accountability to responsibly care for one's own life and needs is not unrelated to the subject of Christian love.

The two are not completely unrelated. Nothing disrupts the peace of a Christian community more than the unwillingness of members to shoulder their part of the responsibility for it (Hiebert, p. 180). To disturb tranquillity violates the love that permeates a truly Christian community. More specifically, some members of the Thessalonian church appear to have taken advantage of the liberality of other Macedonian Christians (cf. 2 Cor 8:1-5) in accepting financial help while making no effort at self-support (Lightfoot, p. 60).²⁵

It is important for us to note that our daily habits of living, the very way we conduct our own business, can manifest love of the brethren just as much as special demonstrations or actions of Christian love. In other words, love touches our lives in many ways which we often fail to recognize. So, the Apostle challenged the Thessalonians to reflect on some of their everyday patterns as it might affect them in their ability to show brotherly love. Undisciplined living very often results in pain to others and disturbs the peace of the body of Christ and can cause believers to fall into disrepute with outsiders.

Paul's exhortations here demonstrate that while this was a loving and growing body of believers, it was not a perfect church (as no church is), and there were conditions that needed changing. Are you looking for a perfect church, or are you willing to be a part of the change process?

Three Exhortations (vs. 11)

To Lead a Quiet or Restful Life

Each of the verbs in verses 11 and 12 employ the present tense. This, along with the nature of the verbs used, ("aspire," "lead a quiet life," and "work") suggest Paul has in mind patterns of life which are to be regular and consistent goals for believers. "To aspire" introduces the responsibility to lead a quiet life. The Greek has one word here, *philotimeomai*, literally, "to love honor," but certainly, for emphasis, there is a kind of play on the word *philadelphia*. When our conduct is not biblical, it will affect the lives of others in negative ways. The idea is "consider it an honor" or "strive eagerly for." Having "a quiet life" is to be something Christians are to strive for or have as their ambition. But what does it mean "to lead a quiet life"?

²⁵ Frank E. Gaebelien, General Editor, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

The word translated quiet (*hesuchazein*) means quiet in the sense of restfulness (cf. Acts 22:2; 2 Thes. 3:12; 1 Tim. 2:2, 11), rather than quiet as opposed to talkativeness (*sigao*; cf. Acts 21:40; 1 Cor. 14:34). The former means “undisturbed, settled, not noisy,” while the latter means “silent.” Paul was telling the Thessalonians to be less frantic, not less exuberant. A person who is constantly on the move is frequently a bother to other people as well as somewhat distracted from his own walk with God. The latter can lead to the former. But a Christian who strives to be at peace with himself and God will be a source of peace to his brethren. Such quietude constitutes a practical demonstration of love for others.²⁶

The Apostle does not tell us here precisely what was causing some to be restless and busybodies within the church. Second Thessalonians 3:6-15 gives part of the picture, but the problem could have been from several causes:

(1) Anticipation of the coming of the Lord was causing an imbalanced excitement in their expectation of the Lord’s return. This was evidently causing idleness. Ignoring the fact that no one knows the precise day nor hour of the Lord’s return (Matt. 24:36), some of the believers at Thessalonica had evidently stopped working and were instead going about from house to house as busybodies.

(2) Self-seeking ambition within the church—seeking to play ‘spiritual king of the mountain,’ zealotry for position and recognition by others—could have been another cause. Such ambition often leads people to run from one person in the church to another to gain influence in an attempt to promote their own agenda. And of course, such behavior often results in spreading rumors and tearing others down in an attempt at self promotion.

(3) Self-appointed confronters, people who see it as their God-appointed role to go about straightening out everybody else. Some people seem to think they have the ‘gift of criticism.’ There is a place for brotherly rebuke or bold love that reaches out to help a brother with an obvious weakness (cf. 5:14; Rom. 15:14; 2 Thess. 3:15). But most often such people have hidden agendas behind their actions. It’s not really love at all, but a way to promote their ideas or opinions, or to prove they are right on some point. The point is, people bashers, as we might call them, are often restless and nervous. They fail to seek and find their significance in the Lord, and so, as a human mechanism to meet their needs to control or dominate, they run about tending to everyone else’s business, interfere in other’s lives, and create havoc in the body of Christ.

Paul’s solution as given here is found in our next exhortation.

To Tend to Your Own Business (vs. 11b)

“Attend to your own business” is simply and literally, “and practice *your* own.” “Attend” is *prasso*, “to do, practice, be engaged in” or “achieve, affect, accomplish, perform.” “Own” is *idios* and means “private, distinct, one’s own.” It refers to what is private and personal and is used of friends, property, home, country, and personal affairs. It has the article and is neuter and means, “your own things” in the sense of “affairs, business.”

Obviously, one of the solutions for restlessness is to tend to your own life and affairs which of course would involve getting one’s spiritual life in order, getting the planks out of one’s own eye that one might have the ability to really help others in their failures. When our first priority is taking care of our own lives, not in a selfish, self-centered way, but in a truly biblical way, we are less likely to become nosy people who go around bashing others in the name of loving confrontation.

However, we must balance this with our responsibility to be involved with and caring for others. Our tendency is to go from one extreme—nosiness, to the other extreme—isolationism.

To Work With Your Own Hands (vs. 11c)

“Although the Greek generally looked down on manual labor as the work of slaves and others, the Jews did not have this attitude. The emphasis here, however, is not on manual labor as opposed to some other form but upon working as opposed to idling.”²⁷ Paul deals with this problem in more detail in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-11. Some evi-

²⁶ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

²⁷ Fritz Rienecker, edited by Cleon L. Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Regency, Grand Rapids, 1982, p. 598.

dently did not respond to this word, so he not only dealt with it again, but (1) defined the refusal to work as being “unruly” and “undisciplined” (2 Thess. 3:6, 11), (2) again pointed to the results, “acting like busybodies,” or “meddlers” in the words of 1 Peter 4:15, and (3) gave directions for church discipline showing how the church is to handle such people in the body.

While we all have a responsibility to help those in need, we also have a responsibility not to help them if they refuse to work or look for a job. Part of the help that people in this condition need is help in finding work, and if needed, the admonition and instruction to prompt them to look for work. They must understand God wants them to be self-supporting and productive in society rather than dependent on society. See also 1 Timothy 5:8.

Two Motivations or Reasons (vs. 12)

Testimony to the Outside World (vs. 12a)

“In this way” translates the Greek, *hina*, a conjunction of purpose or intended result. “Live” is *peripateo*, “to walk” and refers to one’s conduct in all the various areas of life. “A decent life” is an adverb, *eusche*, *mono*, *s*, which means “in a way that is fitting, decently, becomingly.” It consists of *eu*, “good, well” plus *sche*, *ma*, “form, figure, fashion.” It is used in 1 Corinthians 14:40 of doing all things properly and in order (cf. Rom. 13:13). It refers to a pattern or form of life that is becoming and attractive rather than derogatory to those without the faith (cf. 1 Pet. 4:14-16).

The unbelieving world is watching and we should always be concerned about how our lives look to those outside the body of Christ. They cannot see our hearts nor the justifying work of God imputing the righteousness of Christ to our account. What they need and want to see is authenticity—lives that back up our profession with works and a walk consistent with our talk.

Provision for One’s Own Needs (vs. 12b)

The final purpose is the ability to meet one’s own needs. “Need” is *chreia*, “need, necessity.” It refers to an actual need (not wants), something needed for a situation or condition for it to be right. Here it would include food, clothing, shelter and the basics necessities of life. If the unsaved have to work to pay their bills, why should Christians not have to work as well? Work is not a curse. Work is a blessing and a gift.

There are a number of reasons why work is a blessing and is to be promoted by the Christian community and supported in society:

(1) To provide for our needs and our family’s needs (1 Thess. 4:12; 1 Tim. 5:8).

(2) To keep us from being a burden on others (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Cor. 11:9).

(3) To give to those who have need within the guidelines of 2 Thessalonians 3:10 (see also Eph. 4:28).

(4) To be productive in society. God has ordained work to meet the needs of others by providing goods and services. Work is not a curse. It is a way to use the gifts and talents God gives us in productive ways.

- As the creator and sustainer of the universe, God is a worker (Isa. 40:28; Col. 1:16-17).
- As created in God’s image, man has been given creativity and abilities, and needs to work to experience true meaning in life. Scripture even calls work a gift of God (Eccl. 3:13) and declares that man has been given responsibility to care for creation, the works of His hands (Ps. 8:6).
- Work is not the product of sin. God gave Adam and Eve things to do in the Garden before the fall (Gen. 2:15).
- God uses our work to serve others in dozens of ways through goods and services that supply the needs of one another.

(5) To avoid idleness which leads to temptation and meddling (cf. our passage and 2 Thes. 3:6f.).

Addendum 1: The Believer's Walk

(1) The Model for Our Walk: To walk after the example of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 2:6; 1 Pet. 2:21).

(2) The Means of Our Walk:

- By abiding in Christ (1 Jn. 2:6).
- By walking in the Light (1 Jn. 1:7). This means all known sin confessed with no sin unconfessed or hidden (1 Jn. 1:6-9).
- By grace resting in our union with Christ (Ga. 6:15-16).
- By the Spirit (Rom. 6:4; Gal. 5:16, 25).
- According to the Word, the truth received in Scripture (Ps. 86:11; 119:1, 35, 45, 59; Pr. 6:22; Col. 2:6-7; 2 Jn. 1:4-6; 3 Jn. 1:3-4).
- By faith (2 Cor. 5:7).
- To walk in the pursuit of growth (Phil. 3:6; 1 Thess. 4:1).

(3) The Manner of Our Walk:

- In God's plan of good works (Eph. 2:10).
- Not like the unbelieving world in the futility of its mind (Eph. 4:16f.).
- In love (Eph. 5:2).
- As children of the light (Eph. 5:8).
- Carefully, watching our step (Eph. 5:16).
- In wisdom as a testimony to others (Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12).
- In a manner worthy of our calling (Rom. 13:13; Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10).

Addendum 2: Principles on Love and Loving the Brethren

(1) Love is described in 1 Corinthians 13, illustrated in the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and commanded throughout the Bible. Indeed, it is declared to be the preeminent virtue, the summary of the whole of Scripture (Mark 12:30-31). Paul exclaims, "The entire law is summed up in a single command, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:14). Compare also Romans 13:8-10.

(2) The standard and impelling motivation for our love for one another is Christ's love for us (John 15:34; 1 John 4:11). Allender writes, "I will not live with purpose and joy unless I love; I will not be able to love unless I forgive; and I will not forgive unless my hatred is continually melted by the searing truth and grace of the gospel."²⁸ Our hearts need to be melted by God's forgiveness of our sin and sins (cf. Eph. 4:31-32).

(3) Love for one another is fortified by other Christian virtues or Christ-like attributes (1 Pet. 3:8; 2 Pet. 1:7; Rom. 12:10; Eph. 6:23). From the standpoint of its foundation, *love* is a matter of having a purified inner heart or soul (1 Pet. 1:22).

(4) Love is to be a continuous, abiding virtue regardless of the problems or the behavior of the one being loved (Heb. 13:1). Agape love is the ability to love our enemies.

²⁸ Dan B. Allender, Tremper Longman III, *Bold Love*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, 1992, p. 30.

(5) Love is the measuring rod of character, the index by which our lives will be assessed. This is the message of 1 Corinthians 13. "Talent without love is deafening; spiritual discernment and power without love is debasing; and sacrifice of possession or body without love is defrauding."²⁹

Some of the responsibilities of love include:

- It involves serving and doing, not just talking (Gal. 5:13; 1 John 3:18).
- It means a mutual affection and respect which places others above oneself (Rom. 12:10, cf. Phil. 2:3-4).
- It means showing hospitality to one another and to all men as we are able (Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 3:2; Heb. 13:1-2).
- It means showing sympathy to those in suffering (Heb. 13:3).
- It means praying for one another (Eph. 4:18; Rom. 15:30).
- It means not seeking your own advantage, but the well being or advantage of others (1 Cor. 10:24; Phil. 2:3-4).

(6) As the summary of the whole of Scripture, love must be the motive behind anything we do as we minister to others in their need whether encouraging, exhorting, teaching, helping, or comforting.

²⁹ Allender and Longman, p. 33.

Lesson 8: The Comfort of His Coming (4:13-18)

Introduction

With verse 13, Paul begins his answer to another problem he learned about when Timothy returned from his trip to Thessalonica. It concerned questions and a certain amount of anxiety some were having with regard to their loved ones who had died. They were expecting the return of the Lord at any time, but what about those loved ones who had died since trusting Christ? From the content of verses 13-18, it is clear they were asking how would Christ's return affect these loved ones who had since died? Would their death hinder or handicap them in any way? Will those who are alive at His coming have an advantage over those who had died?

As we look at this passage, it is also important that we understand something of the beliefs of the pagan world from which these believers had been redeemed. As verse 13 states, the pagan world had no real hope of life after death. There was an inscription in Thessalonica which read: "After death, no reviving, after the grave, no meeting again." Writing about this lack of hope, Wiersbe writes,

A typical inscription on a grave demonstrates this fact. 'I was not, I became, I am not, I care not.' While some of the philosophers, such as Socrates, sought to prove happiness after death, the pagan world had no word of assurance.¹

When Paul preached the doctrine of the resurrection to the Athenian philosophers, most of them mocked him (Acts 17:32). To the Greeks, *being rid of the body* was their great hope. Why would any man want to have his body resurrected? Furthermore, *how* could his body be resurrected, when the elements of the body would decay and become a part of the earth? To them the doctrine of resurrection was foolish and impossible.²

Apart from the revelation of God in Christ and in the Bible, the world today still has no assurance of life after death. All the other leaders of the various religions and philosophies of the world lie smoldering in their graves. Only one has come forth from the grave to validate His claims and prove that He is the way, the truth, and the life, and that is the person of the Lord Jesus. It was this message that Paul proclaimed to the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17:30-31 when he said:

Therefore, although God has overlooked such times of ignorance, he now commands all people everywhere to repent, **17:31** because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he designated, having provided proof to all by raising him from the dead.

Though the following will not form the outline used in this section of the exposition, it should help to give an overview of verses 13-18. These verses consist of two basic thrusts: **Revelation** (vss. 13-17) and the **Results** or the proper **Response** to that revelation (vs. 18). Their ignorance about certain vital truths regarding the death of believers meant they needed divine revelation on this issue, as in all spiritual issues.

(1) The **Revelation** Concerning Christ's Return (vss. 13-17): Though only three truths are covered here, there are four truths that all believers need to know and live by.

- The **Resurrection** of all church age believers who have died (vss. 14-16).
- The **Rapture** of living believers, those remaining when He comes (vs. 17).
- The **Reunion** of both with the Lord and with all other church age saints (vs. 17).

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 83.

² Wiersbe, p. 87.

- The **Reward** of Believers at the Bema (Judgment Seat) of Christ. Though this is not mentioned here, it is spoken of in chapter 2:19-20 and specifically dealt with in other passages (see 1 Cor. 3:12f.; 2 Cor. 5:8f.).
- (2) The **Results** or **Response**—Reassurance, Rest or Comfort (vs. 18).

The Purpose and Plan (4:13)

4:13 Now we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest who have no hope.

Knowing something of the background of these believers we can readily understand their perplexity and their questions, but as always, it was knowing God's truth that would answer their perplexity. Writing under inspiration and with the hope of the resurrection based on Christ's resurrection, the Apostle wrote to remove their ignorance and comfort their hearts. Paul's primary purpose was to comfort them in their grief as verse 18 shows us. Also note in verse 13 the "so that" clause (hina, a conjunction introducing the purpose, aim, or goal) which states the purpose of this section of verses.

The Apostle wanted to remove both their ignorance and their grief, but the solution to their grief lay in removing their ignorance which would also give hope—a hope the unbelieving world could not have. Thus, the verses that follow show that Paul's plan or goal was threefold.

1. The **first objective** and desire was to remove their ignorance through giving biblical insight. The word used here is agnoeo,, "to be ignorant or unaware of, to be without understanding." This emphasis is found often in Paul's epistles (cf. Rom. 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8). Knowing the Word is fundamental to all spiritual stability.
2. This would accomplish the **second objective**, the giving of hope, a hope based first on the resurrection of Christ (vs. 14) and then on the truth of the rapture. This should remind us of Romans 15:4. It is through the encouragement that comes from the Scriptures that we find hope. While the truth revealed here was a mystery or unknown in the Old Testament (see 1 Cor. 15:51-52), through the revelation given to Paul, this has become a New Testament truth and what Paul later called "the blessed hope" (Tit. 2:13). It is the knowledge of God's Word which comforts and gives us hope. This will be an important point below in *The Persuasion and Proof*.
3. The **third objective** is that this hope would then give comfort and remove their grief. The Apostle does not deny that we may grieve over the loss of loved ones (cf. Phil. 2:27), but that is not the point here. We do not sorrow for our loved ones in Christ who die *as* those who venture into an unknown world. Such sorrow is precluded entirely. We miss them and we may sorrow over **our** loss, but never over **their** loss. Rather, we rejoice for them because they are with the Lord (2 Cor. 5).

Note also that the Apostle is writing to those whom he called "brethren" (adelphoi), a technical term for believers, "brothers and sisters in Christ." This, and the words "as do the rest who have no hope," drive home a very important truth. Only the believer in Christ can know this hope and truly experience this comfort in the face of death. This is vividly illustrated when we contrast the reactions of people who know the Lord and the Word with those who do not when they are faced with the loss of their loved ones or are facing death themselves.

Finally, Paul describes those who died as "those who have fallen asleep." Sleep is a common figure of speech for death, which, in the New Testament, is used only of the Christian who has died. But why? What does this mean? Does this refer to the soul or the body? As you might guess, some use this passage to teach soul sleep, an idea foreign to the New Testament. This will be discussed in the next point.

The Persuasion and Proof—A Preview (4:14)

4:14 For if we believe that Jesus died and arose, so also we believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep as Christians.

The certainty of our hope is the death and resurrection of our Lord. Christ's resurrection marks Him out as both God's Son and our Savior—our solution to sin and both spiritual and physical death (Rom. 1:4; 4:25–5:1).

The “if” does not imply doubt. This is what is called a first class condition in the Greek, which, from the standpoint of the author and for the sake of his argument, assumes something to be true. Many would translate this as “since,” though some would question the validity of that translation since Greek had several words for “if” (epie, epeide). Wallace, who believes the first class condition should never be translated *since* writes,

There is great rhetorical power in *if*. To translate *ei* as *since* is to turn an invitation to dialogue into a lecture. Often the idea seems to be an encouragement to respond, in which the author attempts to get his audience to come to the conclusion of the apodosis (since they already agree with him on the protasis). It thus functions as a tool of persuasion.³

A conditional sentence has two parts, the condition (the protasis) and the result (the apodosis). If the first part is true or assumed to be true for the sake of argument, so is the second part or the result. So, since these Thessalonians believed that Christ really died and rose from the dead, they should likewise believe that He will return, and when He does, He will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. The Christian's persuasion of His death and resurrection, one based on incredible evidence, is also the proof of His coming again just as He Himself promised in John 14.

The Apostle tells us here that when Christ comes again, He will not come by Himself. He will come *with* those who have fallen asleep in (or through) Jesus. This statement describes the nature of death for believers. Through faith in Christ, death for the believer is only sleep and not the threat it once was before salvation in Christ.

But how will He do this? Verses 15f. will explain. But for now note that the text tells us that it is God who will bring them with Him (i.e., with Jesus Christ). God is emphatic in the Greek text and lays stress on the idea that this is nothing less than the miraculous work of God through the Son of God Himself.

Phil. 3:20-21. But our citizenship is in heaven—and we also await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform these humble bodies of ours into the likeness of his glorious body by means of that power by which he is able to subject all things to himself.

But what exactly does the Apostle mean by the words “have fallen asleep”? First, it is a reference to physical death, but sleep is used as a metaphor or a figure of speech. A figure of speech directly compares one thing to another that we are familiar with. Sleep beautifully portrays what death means for a believer, a figure used for death only in the New Testament.

But why? The aim of this metaphor is to suggest what death is like or means to the believer, but this must be understood in the light of all of Scripture: (a) As the sleeper does not cease to exist while his body sleeps, so the dead person continues to exist. The grave is like a bed. (b) As the immaterial part of man when asleep still functions in that he dreams, and his sub-conscious is still at work, so likewise, the believer's soul and spirit are not only awake and enjoying the presence of God (Phil. 1:23), but are at rest. Contrast this to the picture of the rich man in Luke 16:17-31. (c) Finally, and primarily, as sleep is temporary, so also is the death of the body. This figure of speech for death anticipates resurrection.

The verb “to sleep,” *koimao*, is used of both natural sleep (Matt. 28:13; Luke 22:45; Acts 12:6), and of death, **but only of the death of the Christian** (here in vss. 13, 14, 15; Matt. 27:52; John 11:11; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 51; 2 Pet. 3:4). In verse 13 we have the present participle meaning either, “those who are lying asleep,” or “those who fall asleep from time to time,” i.e., as people die in the course of life (iterative present). In verses 14 and 15, the aorist tense is used which points either to the moment of falling asleep or simply the point or fact of dying.

It is also significant that Paul was careful **not** to use the word sleep with reference to the death of Christ. Undoubtedly, this is because He died that we might live and never fear death. The only time the concept of sleep is used of our Lord's death is in the words, “the first fruits of those who are asleep.” “The difference between Jesus’

³ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 692. For his complete discussion on the first class condition, see pp. 690-694.

experience and that of believers is that he really endured actual separation from God for the world's sins. Because of his real death, Christian death has been transformed into sleep."⁴

But what does the clause mean, "have fallen *asleep in Jesus*" and particularly, the phrase, "in Jesus"? This is a somewhat debated clause. Literally, the text says, "And God those who have fallen asleep **through Jesus** He shall bring with Him." The debate is over whether "through Jesus" goes with "have fallen asleep" or with "He shall bring with Him."

Since "bring" has the preposition "with," the sentence has a better balance if we take "through Jesus" with "have fallen asleep."

It is possible that "through Jesus" describes "bring," but this gives the unlikely double reference, "through Jesus God will bring them with Jesus." Instead it describes their "falling sleep," since through him their death is only sleep and not the threat it once was. Also Christians are those whose total existence—life and death—is in and through and for Christ (1 Cor 8:6).⁵

Death has been turned into sleep through Jesus who died and rose again.

But what about belief in soul sleep advocated by certain groups today? For an overview and brief refutation of this belief, see the Addendum at the end of this lesson.

Application: As we study this passage, let's remember that the great purpose of these verses is comfort for Christians in view of the **rapture** of the Church and the **resurrection** of Believers. As we continue to live in a fallen and sin-ridden world, we need the comfort of God's revelation regarding our future as believers in Christ. For Christians, those who believe that Jesus died and rose again, comfort from sorrow is ultimately related to what the future holds because we understand that we live in a sinful world with all that living in such a world means. Regardless, a glorious future lies ahead, and in the meantime, we are to live as sojourners, as aliens on assignment, as ambassadors of the Savior.

The Promise and Prophecy (4:15-17)

4:15 For we tell you this by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep. **4:16** For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will arise first. **4:17** Then we who are alive, who are left, will be snatched up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord always.

Concerning Those Who Remain (vs. 15a)

The Explanation

"For" is a coordinating particle which introduces us to Paul's explanation of how the Lord will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. The demonstrative "this" refers to the statement that follows introduced by "that" (Greek, *hoti*). Thus, Paul introduces us to the reason we can have hope concerning our loved ones who have died, or fallen asleep through Christ.

The Authority for His Explanation

Notice the Apostle's explanation begins with the words, "this we say to you by the word of the Lord." The promise and explanation of these verses were no figment of the Apostle's imagination or wishful thinking. While mortal man cannot know what lies beyond the grave, we do not have to wonder about death and life after death. Through the revelation of Scripture, God has revealed this to us and authenticated its reality through the gift of His

⁴ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Copyright © 1976-1992 by Zondervan Publishing House Electronic edition STEP files Copyright © 1998 by The Zondervan Corporation. Release 10.1.98.

⁵ Translators' Notes from *The NET Bible*, The Biblical Studies Press, electronic media.

Son whom He raised from death to prove that He is the resurrection and the life just as the Savior said to Martha in John 11:25-26.

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even if he dies, **11:26** and the one who lives and believes in me will never die (i.e., will never die forever).

The resurrection was a truth revealed in the Old Testament. Old Testament saints believed in the resurrection as is evident in the exchange between Martha and Jesus regarding the death of her brother, Lazarus, in John 11. Jesus replied to Martha, “‘Your brother will come back to life again.’ Martha said, ‘I know that he will come back to life again in the resurrection at the last day.’”

But the rapture and its details as given in this passage was new revelation and part of the mystery truths given to Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-52 with Eph. 3:3f.). This is what Paul means by the clause, “by the word of the Lord.” Some have advocated that Jesus spoke the words while on earth, their substance being recorded later in such places as Matthew 24:30, 31 and John 6:39, 40; 11:25, 26. There are similarities between 1 Thessalonians 4 and the gospel accounts. These include a trumpet (Matt 24:31), a resurrection (John 11:25, 26), and a gathering of the elect (Matt 24:31), but the dissimilarities between 4:13-18 and the gospel accounts of the sayings of Jesus far outweigh the resemblances. Some of the differences between Matthew 24:30, 31 and 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17 are as follows:

1. In Matthew the Son of Man is coming on the clouds, but in 1 Thessalonians 4 believers ascend in the clouds to meet the Lord.
2. In the gospels angels gather the elect, but in 1 Thessalonians 4 the Son gathers them personally.
3. In Matthew nothing is said about resurrection, while in 1 Thessalonians 4 this is the prominent message.
4. Matthew records nothing about the order of ascent, but this is a principal truth in Thessalonians.

As Robert L. Thomas points out,

The best solution is to see “the Lord’s own word” as a direct revelation to the church through one of her prophets—Paul himself or possibly someone else. The NT prophet’s function was to instruct and console believers (cf. v. 18 with 1 Co 14:31), utilizing predictions about the future in the process (Ac 11:27-28; 21:11). Since these elements are prominent here and since 1 Co 15:51 classifies this subject as “mystery” revelation, which is a characteristic of prophetic utterances, this explanation of Paul’s external authority is quite satisfactory.⁶

Concerning the Lord’s Return (vss. 15b-16a)

His Return Is Imminent

Paul first addresses the issue of those who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, but in doing this, he says “we” and not simply “those.” In the Greek text, the “we” is slightly emphatic and seems to be designed to bring out an important point. Clearly, Paul included himself among those who could be alive when the Lord returns. There is a clear implication here. Paul believed the coming of the Lord and the things described here were imminent and could have occurred in his day (cf. John 21:22; 2 Cor. 5:1; Phil. 3:20; Tit. 2:13). Any other viewpoint fails to give the needed recognition to Paul’s use of the first person pronoun “we” instead of the third person, “those.”

Concerning the return of the Lord, the Apostle divided believers into two classes—the living and the dead. Because Christ’s return is imminent and yet, because no man knows when it will be, Paul sometimes included himself with: (a) the dead, with those who would experience resurrection (2 Cor. 4:14), (b) sometimes with the living, with the living who would experience transformation (here and 1 Cor. 15:51, 52), (c) and sometimes in the category of either possibility (2 Cor. 5:1-8). Because of the believer’s sure and living hope through the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul looked and hoped for the return of the Lord in his day, but he was not afraid of death (see Phil. 1:21f.; 3:21; 2 Cor. 4:16–5:8).

⁶ *NIV Bible Commentary*, Kenneth Barker and John Kohlenberger III, Consulting Editors, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Reference Software.

In Paul's attitude, we see that which should characterize every believer who knows and rests in the truth and promises of Scripture. We should live, look for, and long for the sure coming of the Lord, which, being imminent, could come in our day. But on the other hand, we should never be afraid of death, which may very well come first because of the confident expectation of the resurrection at His coming. This is the "blessed hope." "One of the wonderful things about the hope of His coming is that it burns brightly in the hearts of each generation of Christians regardless long His return is delayed."⁷ Regarding the fact of imminency here, Thomas, in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, has this to say:

Had this not been the Thessalonians' outlook, their question regarding the dead in Christ and exclusion from the *parousia* would have been meaningless. They were thinking in terms of an imminent *parousia*, expecting to see it before death (Best, p. 183). An intervening period of messianic woes or birthpangs was not their anticipation (Best, p. 184), for such intense persecution would have meant probable martyrdom, and in that case they would have had doubts about their own participation in the *parousia*. Hence, Paul believed and had taught his converts that the next event on the prophetic calendar for them was their being gathered to Christ.⁸

The *blessed hope* means none of the signs connected with the Lord's return to earth at His second advent, as mentioned in Matthew 24, are necessary before His return for the church. Such signs herald His advent to earth in the form of the Tribulation judgments or the events of Revelation 6-19, but none of these are necessary for His return for the church. His coming for the church must occur at least seven years before His advent to earth.

The word *imminency* refers to an event that is, so to speak, "hanging overhead; it is something that is ready to occur or could occur at any moment." While other things *may* happen before the imminent event, nothing else *must* occur before that event happens. If something else must occur first, then that event is not imminent. Further, no specific amount of time is specified regarding when the event will happen. It may be soon or it may not be. If a certain amount of time were needed before the occurrence of an event, then it would not be imminent. So an imminent event—like the return of Christ for the church—could happen soon. It might not ... but it could.

When will this be? We simply do not know. Paul obviously did not know either, but the more we see world events coming together for the conditions needed for the Tribulation (Israel's return to Palestine, the European nations banding together, and the rise of one-world thinking in the new age mentality), the closer His return for the church must be simply because His coming for us will precede these events, but it is not dependent on them.

The word "coming" is the Greek noun *parousia*. It was used of the coming and arrival, or the presence of a dignitary like a king. It could look at either aspect and is sometimes translated "coming" (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13), or "presence" (2 Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:12), or "arrival" (NIV, NET, 1 Cor. 16:17). It has both a technical use and a non-technical sense as in 1 Corinthians 16:17, which has no eschatological implications. In 1 Corinthians 16:17, Paul uses it for the coming and arrival of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus. Here the emphasis is on the results of their coming, i.e., their arrival and presence and their ability to meet the needs of Paul. Compare the translation of the RSV. "I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence" (RSV). But then compare the NIV translation: "I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they supplied what was lacking from you" (NIV).

Parousia is one of three key words used of the Lord's return, the others being *apocalupsis*, "unveiling, revelation," and *epiphania*, "manifestation, appearance." These words are used of both the rapture and the second coming of Christ, but this is no reason to assume they refer to one and the same event. A careful study of the use of these words suggests a distinction between the rapture (the return of Christ *for* His saints) and the second coming (the return of Christ *with* His saints).

To conclude that the rapture and the second coming must be one single event because the *parousia* is used of both of them is to commit the linguistic error of *illegitimate totality transfer*. This occurs when one fails to realize or accept the fact that a word may have a different meaning or use in different contexts, which leads to forcing one meaning into all the contexts. For instance, in English the word *trunk* means something entirely different when used of a large box in the attic than when used of an elephant's nose or the main woody axis of a tree. Thus, when the con-

⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1959, p. 64.

⁸ Gaebelein, electronic media.

texts of the various eschatological passages are studied, a number of clear distinctions become apparent between the rapture and the second coming of Christ to earth. In discussing the use of the three words mentioned above and the attempt by some to make them refer to one single event, Radmacher writes:

Finally, it should be noted with respect to the Greek words used that it is not necessary to understand them as *categorizing* words but rather as *characterizing* words. It will only lead to confusion to try to make a distinction between the rapture and the Second Advent on the basis of the words alone; rather, they should be seen in their respective contexts as words that characterize both of the events.⁹

In 1 Thessalonians 4, parousia describes the coming and arrival of the Lord for His bride, the church, the body of Christ. But since the same word is used of His advent to earth as in Matthew 24, some, in attempting to make parousia a *categorizing* word, say there cannot be a period of seven years between the rapture and His advent to earth or you end up with two comings, which, they say, the New Testament does not support. Such an understanding is an illustration of the error of *illigitamate totality transfer* in the use of parousia.

There is plenty of biblical data to show enough dissimilarity between those passages that clearly deal with the rapture and those that deal with the second coming of Christ to earth to warrant the interpretation that they are two different events that occur at different times. One illustration of this difference can be seen in this passage itself. In verse 17, the word “caught up” (arpazo,,), was used of a thief who comes in secret and grabs what he wants while people are asleep. Likewise, the Lord’s coming for the church is secret and takes place while the world is spiritually asleep and indifferent to God (see 5:2). The world does not see the Lord or any aspect of this event other than the disarray that must result with the sudden removal of millions from the earth. On the other hand, His coming as described in Matthew 24 and Revelation 19 is seen by the whole world. How can we account for this difference? Let me make a suggestion!

(1) The parousia of the Lord must be understood according to the context. There is His coming *for* the Church, and there is His coming to earth *with* the church at the end of the Tribulation (Rev. 19). One is silent and unseen by the world, and the other is just the opposite. In one He comes *for* His bride, and in the other, He comes *with* His bride.

(2) The Lord comes *for* His bride and takes her to His Father’s house. This would be heaven. This was the Jewish custom and fits with His promise in John 14. It is at this time that the church, the bride of Christ, is presented to the Groom, the Lord Jesus, and we have the Marriage of the Lamb. This is followed by a time of examination (the Judgment or *Bema* Seat of Christ) and the dispensing of rewards which surely will require a considerable amount of time. When the church returns with Christ in Revelation 19:8, she is already clothed in “fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.” These represent rewards for the good works of believers and will constitute the wedding garments that will glorify Christ throughout the millennial reign of Christ.

(3) Further, as another illustration of the differences between the two events, in 1 Thessalonians 4 the Lord comes and the bride is caught up to meet Him in the air with no mention at all of a return to earth or a judgment of the earth. But in His second coming as described in Matthew 24 and Revelation 19, He comes to earth when every eye will see Him with the judgment of the earth to follow.

(4) Finally, by the promises given in 1 Thessalonians and the juxtaposition and natural chronology of chapters 4 and 5, the rapture occurs before the day of wrath. It means deliverance from the wrath of the Tribulation (1:10; 5:9). At Christ’s second coming to earth with His saints, it concludes the day of wrath (Rev. 16:1, 19; 19:15).¹⁰

⁹ Earl D. Radmacher, *Issues in Dispensationalism*, General Editors, Wesley R. Willis, John R. Masters, Consulting Editor, Charles C. Ryrie, Moody Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 255.

¹⁰ For more on the differences between the two comings and other related issues see *The Truth About the Rapture*, Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, Harvest House Publishers, *The Rapture Question*, John F. Walvoord, Zondervan, 1979, *The Blessed hope and the Tribulation*, John F. Walvoord, Zondervan, 1976, *Come Quickly Lord Jesus, What You Need to Know About the Rapture*, Charles C. Ryrie, Harvest House Publishers, 1996.

His Coming Does Not Hinder Those Who Have Died

What does Paul mean by the statement, “will surely not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep”? “Go ahead” (“precede” in the NASB and NIV) is phthano,, “to precede, go before.” The verb is used with an emphatic negative of denial, ou me. It means “by no means will they go before or precede.” The Apostle is simply saying that death before the return of the Lord will in no way hamper or negatively affect one’s part in the return of Christ for His church.

An Explanation of What His Return Means to Believers—Those Who Remain and Those Who Have Died:

(1) His return is personal: “The Lord Himself” (cf. John 14:1f.; Acts 1:11). “Himself” is emphatic by its position as in 3:11 and 5:23. Why? Paul wanted to fix attention on the fact that, without any intermediary agent as mentioned in Matthew 24:31, the Lord Himself will come for the church (another significant difference between the rapture and the second coming). Attention is fixed on Him in Whom “will be centered all the power and all the glory of the occasion, and Who is yet the very One Who died, v. 14. If He lost nothing by death, neither shall they who fell asleep trusting in Him.”¹¹

(2) He descends from heaven: He comes from the right hand of the Father where He has been our Advocate to intercede on our behalf during the church age (Rom. 8:31f.; Matt. 22:44; Acts 2:33-34; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 1:13; 8:1).

(3) The attendant circumstances. The chief focus is on the fact that it is the Lord Himself who comes, but due to His personal presence, there will be other factors that are in keeping with His glorious presence. He comes *with* a shout of command, *with* the voice of an archangel, and *with* the trump of God. In the Greek text, each of the three nouns has the preposition “with” (Greek en) describing the manner of His return. Each noun also lacks the Greek article which is often present with the preposition en when specificity is in view rather than quality. Rather than specifying *the* voice of an archangel and *the* trump of God, the phrases are more qualitative and may further define the previous statement. The English translation gives the impression three things occur: a shout of command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God. Though this is much discussed and debated, each clause might be better understood as providing a further explanation of the preceding clause, or as a threefold description of one great signal from heaven as Hogg and Vine suggest, i.e., “with a shout of command in an archangel-like voice, even with the voice like the trumpet of God Himself.”¹²

Furthermore, “shout” is keleusma, a military noun which occurs only here in the New Testament. It was used of an order, command, specifically a stimulating cry, either that by which animals are roused and urged on by man, as horses by charioteers, hounds by hunters, etc., or that by which a signal is given to men, e.g., to rowers by the master of a ship, to soldiers by a commander (with a loud summons, a trumpet call).¹³

Many believe this refers to the Lord’s voice mentioned in John 5:24, 28, and is the same as the last trump of 1 Corinthians 15:52. It was at the voice of Jesus that Lazarus came forth from the grave in John 11. Whether it is His voice or not, it applies to both the living and the dead and will be the most stimulating cry we will ever hear. Hogg and Vine point out that this shout is not directly stated to be the voice of the Lord as mentioned in John 5:28, but simply that it peals forth as the Lord descends. To whom it is addressed is not stated. They think it may be the signal to the attendant hosts of heaven.¹⁴ However, that it is His voice is certainly the implication of the text and this fits with John 5:24, 28 and 11:43. As further support for this idea, we can compare Psalm 47:5 which seems to associate the voice or shout of God with a trumpet, “God has ascended with a shout, The LORD, with the sound of a trumpet.”

But what about the last trump of 1 Corinthians 15:52? In both passages (1 Thess. 4:13f. and 1 Cor. 15:52) we have the resurrection of dead believers and the transformation or change of living believers associated with a trum-

¹¹ C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians With Notes Exegetical and Expository*, Pickering Inglis LTD, London, 1914, p. 141.

¹² Hogg and Vine, p. 143.

¹³ Rienecker and Rogers, p. 599.

¹⁴ Hogg and Vine, p. 142.

pet. This, as pointed out above, seems to refer to the commanding shout of the Savior, calling His people from the grave and gathering them together.

However, some have tried to associate this with the last or seventh trumpet of the Tribulation and with the trumpet of Matthew 24:31. By doing this, they attempt to put the rapture either in the Tribulation or at its end, when the Lord returns to earth. The following are some possible answers to such a proposal:

(1) 1 Thessalonians 4:15 describes the nature of the last trumpet. The emphasis is not on the time, but on its character. It is a shout of command with an archangel-like voice either heralding this event or bringing about the resurrection and the rapture of the church. This does, however, herald the end of the church age.

(2) That it cannot or should not be equated with Joel 2:1 or with Revelation 8:7f. should be clear by the obvious differences that exist between these trumpets.

Passage	Trumpeter	Purpose	Result
Matt. 24:31	Angels	Living elect on earth are gathered by Angels	Entrance into the kingdom
1 Cor. 15:52	Not stated	Gather	Resurrection Change
1 Thess. 4:16	God/Christ, it is the trump of God	Gathered in air by Christ Himself, not angels	Resurrection Rapture
Joel 2:1	Humans	Assemble and warn of Danger	War and Invasion
Rev. 8	Angels	Brings on the Tribulation events	Judgments

But what does the Apostle mean by “the Last Trump”? Because of the adjective “last,” some seek to associate this with the seventh or last trumpet of Revelation 8 and thus place the rapture at the end of the Tribulation. But as the above comparison shows, this is a distinct signal, evidently the very voice of the Lord Himself for the church. It is not blown by angels and is not for the world.

John Eadie, a well-known scholar who wrote at the end of the 1800s wrote:

The phrase, “the last trump” (1 Cor. XV, 52), is supposed ... to imply previous trumpets, at the last of which the Judge descends, while others identify it with the seventh trumpet of the Apocalypse; but these notions, the second especially, are exceedingly precarious—the phrase, “the last trump,” being apparently a popular one, and meaning the trumpet in connection with the End.¹⁵

Of course the issue is the end of what? Since this is written to believers of the church age who are waiting for His imminent return, the end is that of the church age, not of the end of the age of Israel, or of all things.

In the Old Testament, the blowing of the trumpet was used to accompany the Theophanies, the manifestations of God, as in Exodus 19:16. There it signaled the approach of the Lord at the giving of the Law. For the church this is the end and involves the Christophany, the manifestation of Christ, but at the same time, it will form the beginning of the end in that afterwards (how soon is not revealed), the Tribulation will begin which will be culminated just seven years later by the manifestation of Christ’s parousia, His presence openly revealed to the world as He descends with His church as described above.

¹⁵ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the First Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Reprint by James and Klock Christian Publishing Co., Minneapolis, 1977), p. 165.

Concerning Resurrection (vs. 16b)

The words, “the dead in Christ,” give us an alternative description of “those who are” or “have fallen asleep” of verses 13-14. “In Christ” refers to believers and shows that even death cannot undermine their position in the Lord. Though the body is dead, the believer’s soul and spirit are not only with the Lord, as other passages show us (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23), but are still secure in the Lord and kept by the power of God (1 Pet. 1:5).

The central revelation here, and one that is key to the concerns of the Thessalonians, is that those who die before the Lord returns for His church will rise first. Rather than being at a disadvantage, they will actually be raised before the living are changed. This refers, of course, to the resurrection of the body when the immaterial part, the soul and spirit, that which comes with the Lord at His return (vs. 14), will be united with the resurrected glorified body. Regarding the nature of this resurrection, Wiersbe says:

This does not mean that He will put the elements of the body together again, for resurrection is not “reconstruction.” Paul argued for the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:35ff. He pointed out that the resurrection of the human body is like the growing of a plant from a seed. The flower is not the identical seed that was planted, yet there is continuity from seed to plant. Christians shall receive glorified bodies, like the glorified body of Christ (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 14:47-58). The dead body is the “seed” that is planted in the ground; the resurrection body is the “flower” that comes from that seed.¹⁶

Since this passage deals with the subject of resurrection, a word regarding John 5:29 is in order. John 5:29 shows us that there are two basic groups of resurrected people, the just and the unjust. The word “hour” in John 5:25 refers to an extended period of time, this present age, and likewise in verse 29 it also refers to an extended period. The resurrection of the just and unjust do not occur at the same time. The same thing is true with regard to resurrection mentioned in Daniel 12:2.

This is clear from 1 Corinthians 15:23-24, which teaches us that there is a special order to God’s resurrection program. The order is Christ first, then believers at His coming or parousia. As suggested previously, there are two phases of this coming, one that is secret experienced only by the church, and one that is seen by all the world. This is the resurrection of the just, the first resurrection (Rev. 20:5-6), but it occurs in stages. This includes (1) a resurrection before The Tribulation, that of the church (1 Thess. 4:13f.), (2) one afterward, that of Old Testament and Tribulation saints (Rev. 20:4; Dan. 12:1-2a).¹⁷ This will be followed by the resurrection of the unjust (cf. Rev. 20:11-15; Dan. 12:2b; John 5:29b). The following chart illustrates the differences in these resurrections and the judgments that accompany them. Another set of judgments mentioned in Matthew are the judgment of the sheep and goats, but this is a judgment of those who are alive at the end of the Tribulation (Matt. 25:31-46).

¹⁶ Wiersbe, p. 87.

¹⁷ Note that Daniel 12:1-2 “predicts the resurrection of the righteous dead of OT times as well as the righteous martyrs of the Tribulation at the second coming of Christ (Rev. 20:4-6). Believers of the church age will already have been changed and raised at the Rapture. (The resurrection of the wicked does not occur at the same time, but after the Millennium; Rev. 20:5.)” (Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible, Expanded Edition*, Moody, p. 1371).

Judgments:	The <i>Bema</i> , Judgment Seat of Christ	OT and Tribulation Saints Judged and Rewarded	The Great White Throne Judgment
Participants:	Church Age Believers	OT and Tribulation believers	Unbelievers of all time
Scripture:	1 Cor. 3:12-15; Rom. 14:10-12	Rev. 20:4	Rev. 20:11-15
Time:	After the Rapture	After the Tribulation	After the Millennial reign

Concerning the Rapture and Reunion (vs. 17)

Now the Apostle addresses the subject of those who will be alive at the Lord's return. Concerning those he says:

(1) They will be *snatched or caught up*. The Greek word is *arpazo*,, "to seize, carry off by force, to seize on, claim for one's self eagerly, to snatch out or away." As the NET Bible has translated it, it carries the idea of a sudden exercise of force, and is accurately rendered "snatch."¹⁸ (Compare John 10:12, 28, 29; Jude 23.)

This event has been known as "the rapture," a term derived from a Latin word meaning "to catch up." One of the definitions of the English word is "the state of being transferred from one place to another, especially to heaven" (American Heritage Dictionary). Though the term "rapture" is never found in the Bible, this is the concept of this Greek word *arpazo*,,. Paul used this word of his own experience of being caught up into the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2, 4). It is used of the catching up of the male-child to the throne of God or to heaven, a reference to the ascension of Christ, in Revelation 12:5. Ryrie comments in connection with these other references,

It would appear from these other occurrences of the word that Paul had in mind being taken into heaven and not just into the mid-air to turn around suddenly and return to earth. He also implies in this idea of rapture the necessary change in mortal bodies in order to fit them for immortal existence in heaven. This is stated in greater detail in 1 Corinthians 15:50-53, and while the method of this change is never revealed, it is clear that Paul believed that it is possible to have a metamorphosis without the dissolution caused by death.¹⁹

(2) They will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Here is a threefold reunion of those alive and those who are living with the Lord Himself when He returns. The clouds in the air form the place of reunion—"not simply because clouds suggested themselves as convenient vehicles for transportation through space but because clouds are a regular feature of biblical theophanies; the divine glory is revealed in clouds, ..." ²⁰ The return of the Son of God is naturally involved in the glory of God; it is a glorious reunion.

(3) This reunion means *meeting the Lord in the air*. This brings out something more of the nature of this reunion. "Meet" is the Greek *apante*,,sis, a special word sometimes used formally of a delegation of citizens who would meet a visiting dignitary and then ceremonially escort him back into the city. It is used somewhat like this in Matthew 25:1, 6 and Acts 28:15. Because of this, some have argued that this proves the Lord returns at the end of the Tribulation. Advocates of this view contend that the church is raptured and resurrected to meet the Lord and then immediately return with Him as He continues His advent to earth. But as Bruce points out, "... there is nothing in this context which demands this interpretation; it cannot be determined from what is said here whether the Lord (with his people) continues his journey to earth or returns to heaven."²¹

Regarding the idea that believers go out to meet the Lord and then escort Him back to earth, Thomas writes:

¹⁸ See also Hogg and Vine, p. 144.

¹⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Moody Press, 1959, p. 66.

²⁰ F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 102.

²¹ Bruce, p. 103.

Whether this is true is debatable. Even if it were true, Christ would not necessarily be escorted back to earth immediately. Usage of the noun in the LXX as well as differing features of the present context (e.g., Christians being snatched away rather than advancing on their own to meet the visitor) is sufficient to remove this passage from the technical Hellenistic sense of the word. A meeting in the air is pointless unless the saints continue on to heaven with the Lord who has come out to meet them. Tradition stemming from Jesus' parting instructions fixes the immediate destination following the meeting, as the Father's house, i.e., heaven (Jn. 14:2, 3).²²

Again, we would point out that in Revelation 19:8, when the church returns with the Lord to earth, she has already been clothed in fine linen, a picture of her rewards for good works.

(4) This reunion means *being with the Lord forever*. It will be a permanent meeting. After all, this is the main point and we dare not lose sight of this regardless of when this occurs. This is the climax of the blessing of this event. The location and time is secondary in view of the final result—ever being with our Savior in glorified bodies (Phil. 3:21).

The Product—Reassurance (4:18)

4:18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The call to encourage one another brings us back to the main purpose of this passage—comfort in place of grieving as those who have no hope. It is the doctrine and truth of this passage and the hope it provides that is the cure for our sorrow over the death and the departure of loved ones, at least for those who know the Lord.

In striking contrast to these words is a papyrus letter of the second century A.D. written by a woman to her bereaved friends. It runs:

Irene to Taonnophris and Philon greeting! I was as much grieved and shed as many tears over Eumoiros as I shed for Didymas. I did everything that was fitting [this refers apparently to certain rites customary at such times] and so did my whole family ... But still there is nothing one can do in the face of such trouble. So I leave you to comfort yourselves. Farewell.²³

Without the comfort of God through the Scripture and the resurrected Christ, how can man truly find comfort themselves? The subject of the Lord's return for and appearing to the church is a subject of a great deal of New Testament revelation. The return of the Savior is not only something that we are to expectantly wait for (Tit. 2:13), but something on which we are to set our affection (2 Tim. 4:8). But this is not just to give comfort or reassurance in the face of death; it is to have a transforming affect on the way we live—on values, priorities, pursuits, and on moral behavior in general. We are sojourners who are here on temporary assignments as ambassadors of Christ. Since we are in the world, but not of it, our lives are to take on the character of the Lord Jesus Himself.

Titus 2:11-15 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. **2:12** It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, **2:13** as we wait for the happy fulfillment of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. **2:14** He gave himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good. **2:15** So communicate these things with the sort of exhortation or rebuke that carries full authority.

1 John 2:28-3:3 And now, little children, remain in him, so that whenever he appears we may have confidence and not shrink away from him in shame when he comes back. **2:29** If you know that he is righteous, you also know that everyone who practices righteousness is fathered by him. **3:1** (See what sort of love the Father has given to us: that we should be called God's children—and indeed we are! For this reason the world does not know us: because it did not know him. **3:2** Dear friends, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. But we know

²² Robert L. Thomas, *Expositors Bible Commentary*, electronic edition.

²³ Hogg and Vine, p. 147.

that whenever it is revealed we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is. **3:3** And everyone who has this hope focused on him purifies himself, just as Jesus is pure).

We have no guarantee that we will see tomorrow or that we will not see death. Death is a fact of life. In fact, as the author of Hebrews tells us, it is an appointment, “And just as people are appointed to die once, and then to face judgment” (Heb. 9:28). But the believer in Christ does have the guarantee that (1) he will not face the judgment of eternal separation from God, Christ having born our judgment for us (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1), (2) that he will be resurrected at the return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:16), and (3) should Christ come in his lifetime, he will be transformed into a glorious body like that of the Lord and caught up to forever be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:17). Wiersbe tells of a quaint inscription on a gravestone in an old British cemetery not far from Windsor Castle. It read:

Pause, my friend, as you walk by;
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, so you will be.
Prepare, my friend, to follow me!

Wiersbe continues and writes, “I heard about a visitor who read that epitaph and added these lines”:

To follow you is not my intent,
Until I know which way you went!²⁴

Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6), also said, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even if he dies” (John 11:25).

It is our prayer that if you do not know Christ as your personal Savior through faith in Him that you will come to place your trust in Him as your Savior from sin and death. If you have never trusted Christ, may we encourage you to go to our BSF home page at www.bible.org and read the section on *Finding God*.

Addendum:

A Brief Overview and Refutation of the Doctrine of Soul Sleep

Based on a misunderstanding of sleep as a metaphor for the death of believers, certain groups teach a doctrine called soul sleep. This is the belief that when a person dies, his body not only dies, but his soul is asleep in a state of unconsciousness until the resurrection when his soul is awakened and united again with his body.

Those who teach this doctrine generally use passages that speak of death as a state of sleep and use the statements of Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6, 10 to support their belief in soul sleep since in these verses, the preacher declares that the dead know nothing (vs. 5) and that there is no knowledge or wisdom in Sheol (vs. 10). In addition to Ecclesiastes, other passages used are: Daniel 12:2; Matthew 27:52; Luke 5:39; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15.

Reasons Why Soul Sleep Is Not Biblical

(1) Some answer the statements of Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6, and 10 by reminding us that this book was written from the standpoint of knowledge “under the sun,” that is, from the viewpoint of the natural man or as man sees things from his natural or human perspective. Divine revelation alone can tell us of the true nature of life after death. Those who hold this view are usually not implying that Ecclesiastes is not inspired, it is, but only that it presents life as man can discern it by his own observations apart from divine revelation.

But the primary emphasis of these verses in Ecclesiastes is to provide a warning against wasting opportunities. It takes earthly time to lay up heavenly treasure, but there are no such opportunities after the grave (Sheol). The preacher in Ecclesiastes is not describing what the state of the dead is like. Rather, he is stating what it is not (the opportunities of this life no longer exist). Part of the problem here is that many have taught that Sheol always refers to the place of the soul and spirit after death. But Sheol and Hades in the New Testament do not always describe the place where the souls of men go, but may often refer to the place where their bodies go—the grave. This passage in Ecclesiastes does not favor soul sleep or even the annihilation of the wicked. Instead, it speaks of the destination of men’s bodies. The condition of the souls of men until the resurrection is not in view. Compare as an illustration, the

²⁴ Wiersbe, p. 93.

use of Hades (the New Testament counterpart for Sheol) in Acts 2:27, “because you will not leave my soul to remain in Hades, or permit your Holy One to experience decay.”

(2) Sleep is a metaphor for physical death, a figure of speech that compares one thing with another, but it is not an explanation for the state of the soul (cf. 1 Thess 4:14 with Rev. 14:13). Sleep is simply a figure of speech which stresses that death is not the end, that it is temporary and restful.

(3) If anything, the metaphor of death as sleep suggest the consciousness of the soul after death because when people are asleep, their subconscious self is awake and active as is evident in the fact of dreams.

(4) Sleep refers to the death of the body, not to the state of the soul (cf. Acts 7:55-60; Luke 8:52-55).

- In Acts 7:55f., Stephen was given a vision of heaven and of the Lord standing to receive him into the Lord’s presence. This passage shows Stephen was confident of being with the Lord immediately after his death (cf. vs. 59).
- Acts 7:60 refers to his physical death or the death of his body only, while in verse 56 he was confident of being in Christ’s presence.
- This is further supported by Luke 8:52–55 which clarifies what Jesus meant when He said, “She is not dead but asleep.” He meant that the girl’s body was asleep. Jesus’ statement here shows the girl’s spirit was neither annihilated nor asleep but had simply departed. After Jesus took the girl by the hand “her spirit returned to her” (vss. 54–55). Note that verse 55 does not say that “her spirit was recreated” or that “her spirit was awakened.” The implication is that the girl’s spirit had only departed her body at the moment of death. Only her body was asleep. It is for such reasons as this that most scholars find that biblical references to the dead sleeping refer to the sleeping of the body, not the soul.

(5) Scripture teaches that though the body is dead (asleep), the soul is conscious and aware of its surroundings between the time of physical death and the resurrection.

- In Luke 16:19-31 both an unbeliever and a believer. are said to have died, but both are shown to be awake, conscious after death, one in torment in Hades, and the other in bliss in paradise or heaven. The Lord portrays them as able to think, talk, remember, feel, and care.
- The same is implied in Jesus’ statement to the penitent thief, “today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:40-43). Of course, this passage has been wrongly translated as Metzger points out:

A theological point is involved in the placing of a comma in Luke 23:43. According to the traditional way of understanding the passage, the repentant robber asked Jesus on the cross to remember him when Jesus entered His kingdom. To this request Jesus responded, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise.” In the interest of supporting the doctrine of “soul sleep” held by Jehovah’s Witnesses, the translators of the New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures have moved the comma so that the verse reads, “Truly I tell you today, You will be with me in Paradise.” But surely here the robber knew that Jesus was speaking to him that day, and so the correct punctuation is that of traditional translations.²⁵

- In Philippians 1:20-23 death is described as “gain” because it brings the believer into the conscious presence of Christ. This definitely implies awareness of the Lord. Since the Lord is with us wherever we go now, how could death be gain if it brought us into Christ’s presence only in an unconscious state?
- In 2 Corinthians 5:1-8, (a) Paul demonstrates his desire and ambition for the rapture, the resurrection, because it means glorification and the reception of his resurrection body. (b) But he desired this during his earthly life before death that he might not be in the intermediate state without a glorified body. In our present state we groan, longing for the glorified body, yet this does not mean the intermediate state is one of unconsciousness or not better than our present state as suggested by Philippians 1:23. Why? (c) Because Paul clearly states that to be absent from the body (physical death) is to be present and at home with the

²⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, “Bibliotheca Sacra,” Jul-Sept, 1993, electronic media, The Theological Journal CD, Galaxie Software.

Lord. These are strange words if we are with Him, but unconscious of His presence. Though this intermediate state is inferior to resurrection, it does mean an absence from present toils and being at home in the presence of the Lord.

- In Revelation 6:9-11, those slain are Tribulation saints who are killed because of their faith in Christ. But this scene occurs before the resurrection of Old Testament or Tribulation saints. They are in heaven and they are not only conscious, but aware of the battle on earth and yearning for God's judgment to be poured out on an unbelieving and rebellious world and for God's righteousness to be established on earth.

Putting all this together, it should be clear that soul sleep is a doctrine that has no biblical support.

Lesson 9: **The Comfort and Challenge Concerning the Day of the Lord** **(1 Thess. 5:1-11)**

Introduction

In chapter 4:13, the Apostle began with, “Now we do not want you to be uninformed.” He then proceeded to enlighten them on an important prophetic theme. In this chapter, we find that Paul had thoroughly taught the Thessalonians on the Day of the Lord. Quite clearly, God wants us to know and understand the prophetic themes and doctrines of Scripture. But why?

There are a number of biblical designs or purposes for the study and knowledge of the various prophetic themes of Scripture. As the last chapter shows, knowing prophecy is designed to comfort, encourage, and give hope where there would normally be no hope. It is also designed to remove ignorance so that Christians might be informed as a protection from erroneous ideas that might disturb them as we see in this passage and in 2 Thessalonians 2. A further blessing of knowing prophecy is that it also protects Christians from the counterfeit strategies of Satan and the world system that is under his control. As an example, one of the ancient counterfeits and one that will be a key note of his last day satanic strategies (a strategy already prominent today) is the belief in one world government which will be portrayed as a utopia and the final hope for mankind.

But the greatest purpose of the prophetic Word is the pursuit of holiness by His people. This is everywhere evident in one prophetic passage after another. Check all the passages dealing with the return of the Lord and you will find that, almost without exception, our Lord’s return is used as a basis for an exhortation to godliness. This includes themes like living as aliens in His service, living for heavenly treasure, and finding comfort in the midst of suffering and persecution through the assurance of Christ’s return. The present passage is no exception. Too often we get so bogged down in the debate over when the rapture will occur (pre-trib, post-trib, mid-trib) that we tend to miss or ignore this emphasis.

An understanding of the prophetic Word should mark us out as a distinct people, just as cream is separated from milk. We are not of this world, just as the Savior is not. This should show in the moral quality of our lives, in our values, priorities, and pursuits. Paul uses several analogies in this passage to illustrate this: **light** versus **darkness**, **sleep** versus **alertness**, **drunkenness** versus **soberness**, and **wrath** versus **deliverance**. Prophecy, then, is not designed to satisfy our curiosity or an urge for the sensational. Its design, in view of what it means spiritually, is to motivate Christians to holy living.

Knowledge Versus Ignorance **(5:1-2)**

5:1 Now on the topic of times and seasons, brothers and sisters, you have no need for anything to be written to you. **5:2** For you know quite well that the day of the Lord will come in the same way as a thief in the night.

The words, “Now on the topic” is the translation of the Greek *peri de* which shows us Paul is turning to another subject, often in connection with answering questions or dealing with issues pertinent to the church he was writing to (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12; and here in 5:1). Though separated by a few words, *peri de* also occurs in 4:12. However, though a new subject is now taken up, it is not one completely unrelated to the previous chapter in that both deal with prophecy of future events with one following the other. The *peri de* does show that the subject of chapter 5 is different and to be distinguished from that of chapter 4:13f.

With the perplexity about the dead in Christ resolved, Paul turns to a new subject (cf. *peri de*, “now about”) yet not one completely distinct from the previous one. It is wrong to say that the two are so different as to be in contrast (Ryrie, “The Church and the Tribulation: A Review,” BS, April-June, 1974, p. 75; Ellicott, p. 67). But it is equally wrong to see this as a simple continuation of the same subject (W.C. Thomas, p. 7). The proper interpretation recognizes a shift in thought, but not without some connection with the foregoing (Walvoord, p. 81; Gundry, p. 105). The direct and affectionate address “brothers” marks the new discussion as an addition prompted by Timo-

thy's report of the Thessalonians' situation. The nonarrival of the *parousia* had created another perplexity for them (Best, p. 203).¹

A natural question arises here in the debate over when the rapture occurs. Walvoord writes,

... The fact that the rapture is mentioned first in chapter 4 before the day of the Lord is presented in chapter 5 is significant. The important subject was the rapture, including the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the translation of living believers. The rapture is not introduced as a phase of the day of the Lord and seems to be distinguished from it.²

Speaking about the significance of *peri de* and the natural chronological order of these two chapters, Walvoord continues:

Accordingly, it is clear that 1 Thessalonians 5 is not talking specifically about the rapture, but about another truth. The introduction of this material at this point, however, implies that it has some relationship to the preceding context. Accordingly, while it is not talking specifically about the rapture, it is dealing with the general subject of eschatology, of which the rapture is a part. Thus it would be a fair judgment that, to some extent, Paul is continuing his discussion by dealing with the broad program of endtime events as defined by the term "the day of the Lord."³

The instruction given in this chapter begins with, "Now on the topic of the times and seasons" (NET Bible, but compare, "times and epochs" [NASB] and "times and dates" [NIV]), was a well known description of the end times and future periods of eschatological fulfillment. "Times and seasons" occurs three times in Scripture (Dan. 2:21; Acts 1:7, and here). On the subject of the rapture, they were ignorant and needed instruction, but not regarding the times and seasons (future periods of eschatological fulfillment). On this they needed no such instruction because of the previous teaching they had received.

The first word, "times" (*chronos*) is concerned more with the idea of elapsed time or duration of time. It could include the idea of particular dates when predictions would come to pass, or it could look at the various periods or ages of God's program for the world. The latter word, "seasons" (*kairos*), stresses the quality or the characteristics of time, hence, the events, the nature of the time with its accompanied signs and characteristics like those expressed in Matthew 24, "the sun darkened," or as expressed here, "as a thief in the night."

"You have no need for anything to be written ..." This comment with what is said in the next verse regarding *the day of the Lord* shows he had taught them carefully and thoroughly about these last time events including *the day of the Lord* which will usher in God's judgments on earth.

Implication: If the rapture of the church was a part of the Day of the Lord, the instruction of 4:13f. would not have been needed for, since he had taught accurately about these things, they would already have been instructed on such an important event.

"For you yourselves know full well" refers to the features of the Day of the Lord. "Full well" is *akribo*,s. It means "accurately, precisely." It was a word of precision and accuracy. Their previous learning had been adequate, definite, and specific regarding the Day of the Lord. Here is an important implication regarding the rapture or the subject of chapter 4:13f. The focus of attention in 5:1f. is "the Day of the Lord." This is a subject of a great deal of biblical revelation and Paul must have gone into great detail explaining this to them (e.g., Isa. 13:9-11; Joel 2:28-32; Zeph. 1:14-18; 3:14-15).

In the Old Testament, the Day of the Lord is referred to by that phrase about 20 times, often with eschatological implications. In addition, a parallel term, "the last days," occurs 14 times, always eschatological. Further, the phrase "in that day" occurs over a hundred times and is generally es-

¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

² John F. Walvoord, *Vital Prophetic Issues, Examining Promises and Problems in Eschatology*, Roy B. Zuck, General Editor, Vol. 6, Kregel, Grand Rapids, 1995, p. 217. This article can also be found in "Bibliotheca Sacra," V134, # 533, Jan. 77.

³ Walvoord, p. 218.

chatological. In Isaiah 2:2, 11, 12 (KJV) the three phrases refer to the same eschatological time. So there was ample reason for Paul to say that his readers knew about the Day of the Lord from the Old Testament itself.

But concerning the rapture there is no Old Testament revelation. This omission from over a hundred passages seems hard to understand if the rapture is the first event of the Day of the Lord, as the posttrib view teaches. But if the rapture is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament, and if it precedes the beginning of the Day of the Lord ..., then it is not strange that Paul had to inform them about the rapture.⁴

According to the passages listed above, the Day of the Lord has multiple characteristics and if the rapture, as important as it is to the body of Christ, were a part of that day or was one of its key events, surely Paul would have included it in his previous instruction.

Facts About the Day of the Lord

1. It includes a time of great judgment and wrath on all the nations and on Israel (Isa. 2:12-21; 13:9-16; 34:1-8; Joel. 1:15-2:11, 28-32; 3:9-12; Amos 5:18-20; Obadiah 15-17; Zeph. 1:7-18).
2. It is associated with the overthrow of God's enemies (Isa. 2:12).
3. It is God's instrument of wrath to purge out the rebels from Israel and results in Israel's return to the Lord (Ezek. 20:33-39).
4. While it begins with judgment to defeat the enemies of God, it ushers in a time of great blessing called the millennium in which Christ will reign with the church, the body of Christ (Zeph. 1:7-18; 3:14-17). "The significant truth revealed here is that the day of the Lord which first inflicts terrible judgments ends with an extended period of blessing on Israel, which will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom. Based on Old Testament revelation, the day of the Lord is a time of judgment, culminating in the second coming of Christ, and followed by a time of special divine blessing to be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom."⁵
5. The day of the Lord is also known by the terms "the time of Jacob's distress" (Jer. 30:7) and "Daniel's seventieth week" (Dan. 9:24-29). Many other students of prophecy refer to this time as the Tribulation (see Matt. 24:9, 21, 29; Mark 13:19, 24; Rev. 7:14). The chief passage on the many characteristics and events of this time is Revelation 6-19.

"As a thief in the night" describes how this day will arrive. The primary point of the *thief* analogy is the element of surprise. A thief usually comes when people are asleep or gone. Dr. John Walvoord writes:

But this earthly wrath does not pertain to those in Christ (v. 9). Their meeting with Christ will be "in the air" and separate from God's dealing with those on earth. The only way to hold that this meeting with Christ in the air is an imminent prospect is to see it as simultaneous with the beginning of the divine judgment against earth. Only if the rapture coincides with the beginning of the day of the Lord can both be imminent and the salvation of those in Christ coincide with the coming of wrath to the rest (vs. 9).⁶

Thomas adds to this thought and writes:

Were either the rapture or the day of the Lord to precede the other, one or the other would cease to be an imminent prospect to which the "thief in the night" and related expressions (1:10; 4:15, 17) are inappropriate. That both are any-moment possibilities is why Paul can talk about these two in

⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *Come Quickly, Lord Jesus, What You Need to Know About the Rapture*, Harvest House, Eugene, 1996, pp. 118-119.

⁵ Walvoord, p. 214.

⁶ John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1967, p. 81.

successive paragraphs. This is how the Lord's personal coming as well as the "day's" coming can be compared to a thief (2 Pet. 3:4, 10; Rev. 3:3, 11; 16:15).⁷

"In the night" is an added detail to the picture. It points to the usual time for thievery, i.e., secretly, under the cover of darkness. As to the spiritual condition of the world, it will be asleep spiritually. Walvoord writes:

When we take the total picture of this passage into consideration, the reason for Paul's introducing it becomes clearer. Although the events of the day of the Lord do not begin immediately after the rapture, the time period as such—following the symbolism of a day beginning at midnight—could easily be understood to begin with the rapture itself. The opening hours of the day of the Lord do not contain great events. Gradually the major events of the day of the Lord unfold, climaxing in the terrible judgments with which the great tribulation is brought to conclusion.

Taken as a whole, the pretribulational point of view gives sense and meaning to 1 Thessalonians 5 and explains why this is introduced after the rapture. In effect, Paul is saying that the time of the rapture cannot be determined any more than the time of the beginning of the day of the Lord, but this is of no concern to believers because our appointment is not the wrath of the day of the Lord, but rather the salvation which is ours in Christ.⁸

Expectancy Versus Surprise (5:3-5)

5:3 Now when they are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction comes on them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will surely not escape. **5:4** But you, brothers and sisters, are not in the darkness for the day to overtake you like a thief would. **5:5** For you all are sons of the light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of the darkness.

First, note the pronouns "they" and "them" in verse 3. In contrast to 4:15 and 16, the Apostle did not include himself nor his readers with those who would see the Day of the Lord, but that is exactly what he did when describing the rapture in chapter 4. Why? Because now in chapter 5 these third person pronouns refer to those left behind after the rapture, that is, non-Christians. In their spiritual blindness and because they have believed the lies of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:9-12), they will be expecting peace and safety, but instead sudden destruction will come upon them—but not on the church which will be gone.

Second, the world will be anticipating world peace through the united efforts of the nations, as has been the case for many years now, especially in Europe. For passages that deal with the issue of man's search for peace and safety, see Daniel 9:27; Revelation 6:2; Ezekiel 38:11.

"Then sudden destruction ..." The word for "destruction" (*olethros*, cf. 2 Thess. 1:9) does not mean annihilation, but the ruination of peace and security through the outpouring of God's wrath on earth in the Day of the Lord. Included in this word is the utter and hopeless ruin, the loss of everything worthwhile causing the victims to despair of even life (cf. Rev. 6:14-17). The peace and safety undoubtedly includes the promises of *the white horse rider* of Revelation 6, the Antichrist. This is the prince of the people mentioned in Daniel 9:27. Likewise, this destruction includes the failure of that peace caused by *the red horse rider* (the scenario of Revelation 6:3) and perhaps also the wars and rumors of wars of Matthew 24.

"Like labor pains on a pregnant woman." The analogy to a woman in labor includes at least four things:

1. The world is "pregnant," ripe for what will happen because of its rejection of the Lord. God's wrath, which has been building up throughout history, will suddenly break forth. The signs of its coming are discernible, even though the moment of its arrival is unpredictable.
2. This stresses the element of surprise: it will come suddenly, like the birth pains of a woman when the child is ready to be born.

⁷ Gaebelin, electronic media.

⁸ Walvoord, *Vital Prophetic Issues*, p. 220.

3. The world can no more escape the coming wrath of God when it breaks out in the Day of the Lord, than a pregnant woman can escape labor pains. A strong expression is used in the Greek (a double negative, *ou me,*) to stress that fleeing or seeking escape will be futile.
4. Like birth pains, it will be short-lived, but will steadily grow in intensity.

The world will be caught off guard and totally surprised because it will have rejected God's revelation and listened to the delusions or lies of Satan and his world system. This is not new, however, for in Noah's day God had warned of a coming flood, but only eight people believed and were delivered (1 Pet. 3:20). Lot also warned his family of the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but they too would not listen (Gen. 19:12-14). These historical incidents Jesus used⁹ as illustrations to warn a certain kind of people of the sudden coming destruction of the future Day of the Lord. He described these people by the term, "this generation." It is important to note that "this generation" in Matthew 24:34 is qualitative and does not refer to a people of a particular period of history. Rather, it refers to a *kind* of people of any generation who are characterized as unbelieving and headed toward eschatological judgment. They are a people who ignore the revelation of God and proceed in their regular daily activities of eating, drinking, getting married, etc., without any concern for the possibility of coming judgment.¹⁰

"But you brothers and sisters" marks out a contrast and introduces an appeal to believers. Though believers in Christ will not be a part of this, it still has a very real and practical application. Note the contrast in verses 4-5 and the words "them" and "they" of verse 3 and "others" in verse 6.

What is Paul saying here?

1. His readers were not "in the dark" with regard to these things; they had been taught about them before. But Paul meant more than this.
2. The Thessalonians along with all believers have a new spiritual position and a whole new realm or sphere of life. They were not even in the same group who would be caught in this day. Being in Christ, their sphere of life was not in the darkness, but in the light (cf. Col. 1:13).
3. Instructed Christians will not be surprised by the coming of this day. Not just because they have been told it is coming, nor simply because it cannot take believers by surprise since they will by then be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 5:9), but because they are to be living differently from the "this generation" kind of people mentioned above. Christians are to be living as alien ambassadors and not as the worldling who seeks all the gusto he can from this life.

"Darkness" continues the figure of night mentioned in verse 2 and calls to mind the *darkness* versus *light* analogy of the Bible. Darkness stands for the realms of:

1. ***Error and ignorance versus truth and understanding***—this is the intellectual aspect of the darkness/light analogy of Scripture. In other words, the world, because of its darkened understanding, is ignorant of this impending doom that even today stands imminently ready to strike.
2. ***Blindness versus sight***—the operational element of this analogy. The world is spiritually blind, it cannot see the truth of Scripture and has believed the delusions of Satan (2 Thess. 2:9f.).
3. ***Wickedness or immoral living versus righteousness***—the moral element of this analogy.

I can't think of anything that better illustrates all three elements of the darkness/light analogy than the tremendous apathy we see today in our country over the behavior of our president. In their pursuit of the good life, acting like a "this generation" kind of people, a large number of people in this country (assuming the polls are correct and not skewed for political purposes) don't care what our president has done so long as their own lifestyle is not affected and they can go on eating, drinking, and marrying, etc.

Verses 4-5 set forth the doctrinal principle and fact: Here Paul declares unequivocally that believers are not in that realm of darkness so that day could overtake them.

⁹ See also Luke 17:26-30.

¹⁰ For an excellent treatment of the difficult term, "this generation," see "'This Generation' in Matthew 24:34, A Literary Critical Perspective," in *The Journal of the Evangelical Society*, 38:3, Sept. 1995, pp. 369-385.

Verse 4. “But you” is very emphatic in the original text. Paul is contrasting the destiny of believers with that of unbelievers. The day (as a thief) can’t overtake them. Believers can’t be a part of such a time. Because of what they have in Christ, they can’t be subject to such a day.

Verse 5 gives the positive reason why. “For” introduces us to the reason for the statement of verse 4. “All” and “sons” are emphatic in the Greek text. “Sons of the light and sons of day” have a qualitative emphasis in the Greek text. Not simply the sons, but those characterized with all the blessings and privileges of sons. The coming of the Day of the Lord, and this is Paul’s subject, is a day of darkness, a night time kind of day. Actually, it is also a day of wrath and we as believers cannot be appointed to such a day because Christ bore God’s wrath for us. Thus, believers, by virtue of their new nature and position as children of light, as sons of the living God in Christ, can have no part in such a day. Compare also 1 Thess. 1:10.

Thomas writes,

Growing out of this assertion that believers will not participate in darkness is the promise of their non-participation in “the day” of the Lord. It will not overtake them by surprise—“like a thief” overtakes his victim. As v. 5 explains, their position in Christ guarantees their deliverance from this.¹¹

Soberness Versus Drunkenness (5:6-8)

5:6 So then we must not sleep as the rest, but must stay alert and sober. **5:7** For those who sleep sleep at night and those who get drunk are drunk at night. **5:8** But since we are of the day, we must stay sober *by putting on the breastplate of faith and love and as a helmet our hope for salvation.*

With verses 6-8, Paul gives the **practical application** of this doctrine indicated by “so then.” In the Greek text, this is *ara oun*, a very strong way to point the reader to the application and consequence of what he has just said. Here Paul makes the believer’s position as sons of the light the basis for the following exhortation. Since we are not of night or darkness and not subject to such a day, let us not be asleep spiritually, but be watchful. Let us live in a manner that is consistent with our life and standing in Christ and the future glory we will share with Him.

“Sleep” is the Greek *katheudo*,, a different word from the one used in chapter 4 for death. *Katheudo*,, refers to a state of spiritual insensitivity. In Ephesians 5:14, believers are enjoined to wake out of such a sleep that they might walk in the light of Christ in wisdom as wise and not foolish. Here in 1 Thessalonians 5, they are enjoined not to enter into it. In view of the context and the meaning of the text, a comparison of the words used for sleep here and in chapter 4 is in order.

- In chapter 4, the word for sleep, *koimao*,, refers to a gentle, peaceful sleep and refers to physical death. It is a synonym for death and is in contrast with “those who are alive.”
- In chapter 5, *katheudo*,, looks at the opposite, a state of sleep which is restless and wild. It refers to spiritual indifference and to carnality. It implies immorality and a life that seeks to live devoid of a relationship with God. *Katheudo*,, is a synonym for spiritual lethargy or carnality and is in contrast with not physically being alive, but with being spiritually awake and in tune with the Lord.

“Stay alert” or “watch” is *gre,goreo*,, which means “to be awake, watchful, alert.” Here it is used figuratively for being spiritually awake and alert. As a strong contrast to what precedes, the use of this word in this context with *katheudo*,, shows us clearly that *katheudo*,, refers to spiritual indifference and not physical death in this chapter. *Gre,goreo*,, is never used as a synonym for being physically alive.

“Sober” is likewise a figurative term here and states the same idea, but under a different synonym, that of spiritual sobriety. This word brings out the need to be under the Spirit’s control (Eph. 5:18).

With the words of verse 7, “For those who sleep sleep at night and those who get drunk are drunk at night,” the Apostle reinforces the need for sober alertness by calling our attention to that which characterizes the unbelieving world. In the Greek text here, there is a certain emphasis on the nature of how the unbelieving world lives. This is so

¹¹ *Expositors Bible Commentary*, electronic media.

because of the repetition of the words “at night” and by the grammar used. “Night” in both cases is in the genitive case. Paul could have used the accusative or the dative case. If he had used the dative case with the noun “night,” he would have stressed the length of time, like all night long; if the dative case, the focus would have been on a particular point during the night. The use of the genitive case, however, stresses the kind of time, a nighttime kind of existence, an existence in the dark.

Paul, then, is clearly calling believers to stay spiritually awake. As Christians, we are never to be in a state of slumbering unwatchfulness or in frivolous activity. Instead we are to be spiritually awake, sober, and living in anticipation of the Lord’s imminent coming—and certainly not worried about being caught in the Day of the Lord.

With verse 8, the Apostle tells us how, since we are of the day, we can be alert, watchful, and sober or properly oriented to the Lord’s coming. Here again we have the Christian triad of faith, love, and hope as those fortifying qualities that prepare believers for effective living (see 1:3). These Thessalonian believers had demonstrated all three of these qualities, but we must all continue to maintain and even grow in faith, love and hope (confident expectation) if we are to live soberly in a world that is in darkness—drunk, disoriented to the truth of God.

With the mention of the breastplate and helmet, Paul turns to the metaphor of a soldier. This was one of his favorite illustrations of the Christian life (Rom. 13:12b; Eph. 6:10-18; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:3-4; 4:7a). In view of the fact Christians belong to the day, they must be prepared to live accordingly. Such requires living soberly like a soldier on duty.

... A Roman **breastplate** covered a soldier from his neck to his waist and protected most of his vital organs (cf. Eph. 6:14). That is what Christians’ **faith and love** do. Faith in God protects inwardly and love for people protects outwardly. These two graces cannot be separated; if one believes in God he will also love other people (cf. 1 Thes. 1:3; 3:5). These attitudes equip Christians to stand ready for the rapture. In addition, **the hope of salvation** guards their heads from attacks on their thinking. The salvation they look forward to is deliverance from the wrath to come when the Lord returns, as is clear from the context. It is not a wishful longing that someday they might be saved eternally. Such a thought is entirely foreign to the New Testament. Followers of Christ have a sure hope; they are not as others who have no hope.¹²

Salvation Versus Wrath (5:9-11)

5:9 For God did not destine us for wrath but for gaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

5:10 He died for us so that whether we are alert or asleep we will come to life together with him.

5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, just as you are in fact doing.

The “for” of verse 9 is the Greek *hoti*, used here as a causal conjunction, “because, since, for.” It points us to the reason for following the above exhortations, especially that of verse 8. The reason is our guaranteed deliverance or why we won’t be overtaken as a thief by the Day of the Lord and why we should live soberly putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of deliverance.

The reason is thus twofold, one negative and one positive. (1) Negatively, believers are not appointed to wrath. In the context, the wrath is the Day of the Lord. (2) Positively, all believers are appointed unto obtaining salvation from this awful day through the Lord Jesus. To emphasize this positive element, Paul used the Greek conjunction *alla*, a conjunction of strong contrast. The salvation here includes all that we have in Christ, but by context, the Apostle specifically had in mind deliverance from the wrath of the Day of the Lord by means of the rapture since both the rapture and this day are seen as imminent (cf. 4:13-18).

God’s intention for them is not the **wrath** that will come on the earth in the day of the Lord, but the full **salvation** that will be theirs when the Lord returns for them in the clouds. The wrath of God referred to here clearly refers to the Tribulation; the context makes this apparent. Deliverance from

¹² Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

that wrath is God's appointment for believers. This temporal salvation comes through the **Lord Jesus Christ** just as does eternal salvation.¹³

With verse 10, the Apostle points to the all-encompassing nature of our salvation in Christ and reiterates the principles of Romans 8:1 and John 5:24-25, that for the believer in Christ, there can be no judgment of God's wrath because Christ has borne that judgment for us. Thus, the *basis of our confidence* is the Lord Jesus Christ because He is "the One who died for us." The Greek text is very descriptive here calling our attention to a further fact that defines the reason for our deliverance. Paul used what grammarians call *an adjectival participle* which ascribes a special fact, quality, or characteristic to the noun or substantive it modifies, or it may even add a further defining fact. Here that substantive is our "Lord Jesus Christ" and the reason for our deliverance is that He is "the One who died for us." The Apostle then calls our attention to the *outcome of His death*—"that whether we are alert or asleep, we shall live though Him."

First, to what does "sleep" refer in this verse? Does it refer to death as in chapter 4 or to spiritual apathy as in 5:6-7? Some claim that "awake or sleep" is used metaphorically for whether one is physically alive or physically dead (cf. Luke. 17:34). This is possible, but certainly not plausible in view of the context. These words refer to spiritual carnality or apathy.

(1) Context: The immediate context favors this view because of vs. 6-7 and the call to be alert and sober. Remember, the Apostle has changed to a different subject (see again the use of *peri de* as discussed above).

(2) Syntax: Sleep is connected with being awake (gr., *goreo*,). In this context this clearly deals with spiritual alertness.

(3) Lexical: More importantly, while the word for sleep here, *katheudo*,, is used of death in one passage in the gospels (Matt. 9:24), *gr., goreo*,, the word used for being alert or awake is never used metaphorically of physical life in the Greek Bible.¹⁴ The use of *katheudo*, for physical death is rare. Normally, it is used of spiritual sleep. Since Paul used *koimao*, for the death of believers in chapter 4, it is highly unlikely that if he meant that here, he would not substitute the metaphorical *koimao*, for *katheudo*, since that would leave no question.

(4) Application: Not only does this passage stress the sufficiency of the finished work of Christ, but this passage also becomes an argument against the **partial rapture theory**. Those who believe in a partial rapture believe that only those who are in fellowship and walking with the Lord will be raptured. All carnal Christians will have to go through the Tribulation. But this passage affirms that, because of the finished work of the Lord Jesus, all believers, whether they are alert or spiritually asleep, will be delivered from the coming wrath should they be living when rapture occurs.

Verse 11. "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, just as you are in fact doing." With verse 11 we come to the final application of this section. "Therefore" is *dio*, a strong coordinating or inferential conjunction. It points us to the consequence of the preceding truth with *two responsibilities given*:

(1) We are to comfort one another. This is one of the many "one another" passages of Scripture. This exhortation along with the many other "one another" exhortations call on us to be involved in the lives of one another in order to give comfort and encouragement. "Comfort" is the Greek *parakaleo*,, which includes the concept of giving aid, of coming alongside to help, or to enable as needed. The noun form is used of the Holy Spirit who is called our *Comforter* or *Enabler*.

(2) We are to "build one another up." This is the Greek *oikodomeo*,, "to build up, erect, restore." Here it is used metaphorically of spiritual edification or restoration as might be needed in the life of each individual believer. It refers to an intellectual grasp of the truth discussed so that it fortifies the heart and mind. But toward what are we to build up one another? Toward living for the Lord in the sufficiency of His glorious life. We are to help one another stay sober and spiritually awake in view of who we are as Christians and in view of our glorious inheritance. This means we are to help other believers find their strength in the Savior rather than in the details of life or from the things of this world which is passing away and headed for sure destruction. We are not to be a "this generation" kind

¹³ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

¹⁴ Gaebelein, electronic media.

of people who live as worldlings or earthdwellers, as those who make no plans for the future or are unconcerned about spiritual matters.

His own encouragement and edification in this letter were not enough. This new instruction needed constant repetition and reemphasis. It was to be added to the body of truth they already had received, and as they were encouraging each other in their meetings and in private conversations about other revealed truth they were to include this great truth as well. Believers do not need to be hearing something new all the time, but they often do need to remind themselves of what they already know so that they do not forget it. This verse gives some insight into the meetings of the early church. They included opportunity for mutual edification among the believers. Mutual encouragement and edification are still needed in every local church. And encouragement and edification with reference to their hope in Christ's return is especially needed.¹⁵

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, the purpose of the prophetic portions of Scripture must never be reduced to the realm of simply satisfying one's curiosity nor should it become a source of tension or purely academic argument. As with one prophetic passage after another, the design of the truth of this portion of Scripture is practical. It is designed both to comfort and to challenge us to godly living. The preceding chapter, 4:13-18, was primarily aimed at giving comfort in the face of death, while this chapter, 5:1-11 is designed to **comfort** and to **challenge**. It comforts us in that, should the Day of the Lord come in our lifetime, a day that begins with great wrath, we will not face that wrath but will be delivered by the blessed hope mentioned in the preceding chapter. It also challenges us to live as people of the day or the light. In other words, the element of comfort must not lull us into apathy where we live for the temporal and cheap experiences of the world. Rather, in view of all that will follow the parousia of the Lord we should live accordingly. The great events that follow include the *Judgment Seat or Bema of Christ* when we will stand before Him to receive rewards or their loss. They also include our returning with Him in glory at the end of the Tribulation "when he comes to be glorified among his saints and admired on that day among all who have believed—and you did in fact believe our testimony" (2 Thess. 1:10).

Having this outlook means that we will live soberly and alertly as people of the day (vss. 6-8).

The soberminded believer has a calm, sane outlook on life. He is not complacent, but neither is he frustrated and afraid. He hears tragic news of the day, yet he does not lose heart. He experiences the difficulties of life, but he does not give up. He knows his future is secure in God's hands, so he lives each day creatively, calmly, and obediently. Outlook determines outcome; and when your outlook is the *uplook*, then your outcome is secure.¹⁶

The position presented in this commentary is that of the pretribulation viewpoint of the rapture of the church. I recognize that many other godly students of the Word disagree with this and, while I will not take the time to set forth the reasons for this conviction, I can suggest a number of excellent books that do. Some of these are: *The Rapture Question Revised*, and *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, both by John F. Walvoord, Zondervan; *Come Quickly Lord Jesus*, by Charles C. Ryrie, Harvest House Publishing; *The Truth About the Rapture*, Pocket Prophecy Series, by Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy; *Rapture Under Attack*, by Tim LaHaye, Multnomah Publishers; *Snatched Before the Storm? A Case for Pretribulationism*, by Richard L. Mayhue, BMH Books.

¹⁵ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

¹⁶ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 101.

Lesson 10: The Conduct of the Assembly (5:12-22)

In the first chapter, the Apostle thanked God for this body of believers because, among other reasons, they were an example to the believers in Macedonia and Achaia and because their testimony had literally echoed out across the country. If such a testimony was to continue, certain basic responsibilities to the church leadership, within the leaders themselves, and within the church as a whole were absolutely necessary. Unless the leadership is properly recognized and functioning and there is peace within the assembly through a deep spiritual relationship with the Lord, their witness, like undernourished grapes, would soon die on the vine. While no specific pattern of leadership is set forth in this early epistle (i.e., elders and deacons), there is a clear reference to those who were leading, what that leadership involved, and to the need for respect of that leadership and for the right reasons.

The emphasis in these verses might imply certain problems had been communicated to Paul by the return of Timothy, due to some of the problems that existed there like the disorderly mentioned in verse 14. Nevertheless, the instructions and exhortations given here are fundamental regardless of conditions and need to always be guarded in any church. This is because, as previously stressed, there are no perfect churches. The leaders will not be perfect and neither will be the rest of the flock. Because of this, the tendency is for Christians to neglect, ignore, or leave the church, sometimes skipping around from one church to another. Of course, there may be times when one needs to purge himself from a church for certain doctrinal or other spiritual reasons if they are serious enough, but too often the reasons are superficial. Christians need the protection and edification God designed to occur in the local church. We are part of the family of God, and we need one another not just in a general sense, but in the atmosphere of a local church.

Twenty one times in the Thessalonian epistles alone, Paul addressed the believers of this church as “brethren” (the Greek adelphoi). Such plural nouns as this one are often generic and refer to an entire class, brothers and sisters, or fellow believers. The point is that we are spiritual brothers and sisters born into the family of God by the Spirit. No family is perfect, but, as Wiersbe points out, “... without a family to protect him and provide for him, a child would suffer and die. The Child of God needs the church family if he is to grow, develop his gifts, and serve God.”¹ Verses 12-28, continuing the one another concern of verse 11, instruct us on a number of vital principles needed for a healthy and growing body of Christ that is truly able to carry out mutual edification in a peaceful and loving way.

Instructions in Relation to Church Leaders (5:12-13)

5:12 Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who labor among you and pre-side over you in the Lord and admonish you, **5:13** and to esteem them most highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Verses 12-13 are addressed to the entire congregation, as is most likely the case with verses 14ff. Though ad-dressed specifically to those who are led, the very nature of what is said is clearly instructive to both the leaders and to those who follow their leadership and these verses will be dealt with accordingly. Furthermore, “lest the preceding words should be misunderstood to imply that churches can be maintained without leaders, the Apostle proceeds to urge their recognition; this forms an introduction to the general instructions upon church life which follow.”² In keeping with this principle, we should note that in Titus 1:5 Paul teaches us the organization of the Cretan church was unfinished due to the brevity of Paul’s visit. Thus, Titus was to correct the situation (“set it in order”) by ap-pointing elders in every city or town as the Apostle had given direction. In other words, a church is not truly com-plete and functioning as God intended without an appointed leadership according to the guidelines of Scripture (1 Tim. 3:1f.; Tit. 1:5f.; Heb. 7:7, 17; and here).

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 109.

² C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians With Notes Exegetical and Expository*, Pickering Inglis LTD, London, 1914, p. 177.

For Those Who Are Led (vss. 12-13)

The Apostle begins with “now we ask you.” The verb used here is *erotaō*, a word used of a request from a friend and is more intimate and personal than the stronger *parakaleō*, of verse 14, “I urge, exhort.” The request concerns three responsibilities: (1) to acknowledge, recognize their leaders, (2) to appreciate them highly because of their work, and (3) to be at peace among themselves.

Acknowledge Them (vs. 12)

“Acknowledge” is a present infinitive of the verb *oida*, “to know, acknowledge, recognize.” Some understand *oida* in this context to mean “appreciate, value.” But this idea is found in the second request, “to appreciate highly.” There is the need in every congregation to become aware of and recognize those God has raised up in their midst who perform the duties and functions of a caring leadership. This is what we can call an emergent leadership and demonstrates the fact they are God’s appointed leaders. The responsibility of the church then is to first discern and then recognize such men (Acts 20:28b) as their leaders. This would include a formal appointment to places of service and submission (1 Tim. 3:1f.; Tit. 1:5; Heb. 13:7, 17).

Esteem Them Highly in Love (vs. 13)

“Esteem” is the verb *hegeomai*, but the use here is a rather rare nuance. *Hegeomai* means (1) “to lead, guide, go before,” (2) “to think, consider, regard,” and from this (3) “esteem, respect.”³ “Very highly” is a strong adverb, which means “super-abundantly” or “quite beyond all measure” (the highest form of comparison imaginable).⁴ Two things are to guide this high appreciation that bring balance, protection, and direction to it.

(1) The first is “love.” Leaders are to be esteemed highly *in love*. The sphere that is to envelop a flock’s esteem for their leaders is love, the Greek *agape*, which is a love that chooses to act for the well being of its object, and often sacrificially. This would include all the things that constitute the guidelines of Scripture for loving one another. It would include the negative like refusing to gossip, malign or criticize them to others. But it also included the positive like helping in ministry, expressing thankfulness, appreciation, and providing for them financially in an adequate, God-honoring way (see Gal. 6:6-9; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; though it deals with itinerant teachers, see also 3 John 6-8). Churches need to examine what they are doing that demonstrates their esteem and love for their leaders. Too often all leaders hear or experience are the negative complaints.

(2) The second guide is seen in the words “because of their work.” We must note this carefully. Too often, when leaders are esteemed, it is for the wrong reasons. The reason given here is not *status* or *position* or *dynamic personalities* or *good looks*, tall, dark, and handsome. In Christian ministry *status* depends on the nature of the work (function) and not *vice versa*. The nature of this work will be discussed below.

Be at Peace Among Yourselves (vs. 13)

Previously the Apostle used two infinitives in the Greek text to express the content of the request of the missionaries, Paul and his associates. Now suddenly, he switches to a present imperative. Why this sudden change and the command to be at peace? This is not an uncommon exhortation in the New Testament for believers (see Mark 9:50; Rom. 12:18; 14:19; 1 Cor. 7:15; 2 Cor. 13:11; Col. 3:15; 2 Tim. 2:22). Its sudden insertion here, however, “... may be that the recognition of such people and deference to their judgment would check any tendency to anarchy, with consequent strife, that might manifest itself among them.”⁵ But the command to live in peace is not only a protection, but a result. Perhaps the Apostle is saying here that obeying the former instructions will enable you to fulfill this command.

³ Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

⁴ Bauer, Gingrich and Danker, electronic media.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 45, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 120.

For Those Who Lead (vs. 12)

As these verses give guidelines for those qualities that a congregation might look for in recognizing an emergent leadership, so they also provide wonderful guidelines for those who lead. In this, the Apostle describes three things, (1) those who labor, and (2) who preside over you, and (3) admonish you, that are to characterize the leaders. This is clear for we have one article with three participles connected with “and.” Each of the participles are in the present tense and, in this context, the present aspect points to what should characterizes the ministry of these leaders.

Those Who Labor

“Labor” is the verb *kopiao*, (1) “to become weary, tired,” (2) “to work hard, toil with effort, strive.” It may describe both a mental and physical kind of labor. Paul used this word frequently to describe his own ministry (see 1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16; Col. 1:29; 1 Tim. 4:10). Ministry is hard work and often leads to weariness, not **of** the work, but **in** the work, and there is a difference. This is why Paul often added the dimension of spiritual enablement, as in Colossians. In connection with the great goal of bringing believers to spiritual maturity, he said, “Toward this goal I also labor (*kopiao*), struggling according to his power that powerfully works in me.” It is when men and women labor in their own strength that they become weary of the ministry and want to throw in the towel.

It is imperative that those who are told to follow and appreciate the leadership of others have a good example in their leaders of how love produces labor (hard work) on behalf of others (1:3) in contrast to some in the church at Thessalonica that were failing to work (see 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:6-15). But in what ways do these leaders labor among the Thessalonian believers? This is spelled out, at least in part, in the following description.

Who Preside Over You in the Lord

The word “preside” is *proisteomi*, which has two fundamental uses: (1) “be at the head of, rule, direct, manage,” and (2) “be concerned about, give aid to.” From this last use, it also came to have the idea of “busy oneself with, be engaged in, attend to” as in Titus 3:8, 14. It is translated “manage” in relation to the family (1 Tim. 3:4-5, 12), “leads” or “lead well” in relation to the local church (Rom. 12:8; 1 Tim. 5:17). The KJV, NKJV, NASB, and NRSV all translate 1 Timothy 5:17 with “rule,” but the better translation, in view of New Testament theology, is “leads” or even “caring leadership.” While there is authority in their leadership, the focus is clearly on a loving leadership, or management like a father or shepherd. The leadership of the church is never to be like that of the world where leaders many times exercise a dominating leadership, often with the desire for status. Leadership in the New Testament church, whether in the home or the local assembly, is to be that of a servant who seeks to care for the needs of the flock.

Luke 22:24 A dispute also started among them over which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. **22:25** So Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ **22:26** But it must not be like that with you! Instead the one who is greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves. **22:27** For who is greater, the one who is seated at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is seated at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

1 Peter 5:3 And do not lord it over those entrusted to you but be examples to the flock.

In the New Testament, those who lead are called “elders” (1 Tim. 5:17) and “overseers” (Tit. 1:7). Both of these terms refer to the same official position of leadership. *Elder* lays stress on the maturity needed, along with the dignity of the office. *Overseer* points to the function of the office. That these are one office and not two is seen in the interchange of the two terms in Titus 1:6-7 and in Acts 20:17, 28, as well as in the parallels between these verses and 1 Tim 3:1-7. Two other terms used for the same office and its function are (1) *hegeomai*, “to lead, guide” (Heb. 13:7, 17) and (2) *poimaino*, “to shepherd” (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2).

These words, and Paul’s emphasis in 1 Thessalonians 5:13, clearly shows the need of leadership in the local church. It is important to note, however, that this investment of leadership was plural, not singular. Although the titles of elder or overseer are not used here, we should not think that such leadership had not been established this early in the church for Paul and Barnabas saw to it that elders were appointed in every church as early as their missionary journey in Acts 14:23.

The final phrase, “in the Lord,” must not be overlooked. The oversight or leadership finds its authority, example, and nature in the sphere of the Lord Himself who is the Great and Chief Shepherd (Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:4). First, such leadership is by divine appointment rather than human appointment. Second, the Lord Jesus Himself is the great example of how men should lead (Luke 22:24-27). Finally, these words “... limit the scope of the authority of the elders to the spiritual concerns of the saints, and show that there was no intention to deny or to limit the authority over Christians of civic or political rulers in the things that lie within their proper spheres.”⁶ The fact that they are “leaders in the Lord” emphasizes that they act in the interest of Christ and for the good of the entire community, not for self-gain (against the idlers’ accusations to the contrary).⁷

Who Admonish You

The other caring function of these leaders mentioned here is that of admonishing the flock at Thessalonica. “Admonish” is *noutheteo*,,, “to admonish, warn, instruct.” Literally it means “to put into the mind.” It might be used of general instruction, but it was often used where there were wrong tendencies that needed correcting. It involves a moral appeal to the will, but one based on understanding through biblical instruction. There is a vital difference between biblical admonition from mere protest or reprimand. Biblical admonition is based on instruction with the goal of correction based on spiritual understanding and conviction while the latter is little more than verbal disapproval. A classic illustration of this is Eli the priest in 1 Samuel. First Samuel 2:24 records Eli’s verbal disapproval of the behavior of his degenerate sons, but in 3:13, God rebuked Eli because of his failure to admonish his sons. Interestingly, the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew text) uses the imperfect of *noutheteo*,,. The imperfect points to a habitual pattern of failure in Eli’s leadership of his sons.

Instructions in Relation to Various Biblical Responsibilities (5:14-22)

5:14 And we urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the undisciplined, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient toward all. **5:15** See that no one pays back evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all. **5:16** Always rejoice, **5:17** constantly pray, **5:18** in everything give thanks. For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. **5:19** Do not extinguish the Spirit. **5:20** Do not treat prophecies with contempt. **5:21** But examine all things; hold fast to what is good; **5:22** stay away from every form of evil.

That there is a slight change now in the focus of Paul’s instructions is clear by the words, “And we urge you, brothers and sisters.” Not only does he repeat the address “brothers and sisters” (*adelphoi*), which makes it parallel to verse 13, but he uses “we urge” which is stronger than the “we request” of verse 12. “Urge” is *parakaleo*,,, “to appeal to, exhort, urge, encourage.” Now Paul addresses not just those who are led, but the whole flock.

Some early church fathers, beginning with Chrysostom, saw these strong directives as addressed to the leaders, thus counterbalancing those just given to the rest of the people (Best, p. 228). Such a distinction, however, finds more difference between the leaders and the led than is justified at this point in church history (Hogg and Vine, p. 181). It also overly restricts “brothers,” which must broadly designate the whole Christian community. Furthermore, Romans 12:14-17, a section similar to 1 Thessalonians 5:15, is directed to the whole Roman church, not just to its leaders.⁸

An outstanding feature of this section is the triple series of short commands. Each has a verb in the imperative with an object or an adverbial amplification.

(1) The first series consists of four exhortations aimed at the whole body in carrying for one another (vss. 14-15). Though verse 15 contains two more imperatives, they seem to form an amplification of what is involved in showing the patience commanded in the fourth exhortation. These verses deal with the ‘one another’ responsibilities all believers have to each other in a pastoral sense.

⁶ Hogg and Vine, p. 179.

⁷ David Alan Black, *The Journal of The Evangelical Society*, “The Weak in Thessalonica: A Study in Pauline Lexicography,” Sept. 1982, p. 312.

⁸ Gaebelein, electronic media.

(2) The second series consists of three commands for doing the will of God (vss. 16-18). These commands seem to be directed more at the individual.

(3) The third series consists of five commands that are somewhat general, though they may all relate to prophetic utterance in the early church (vss. 19-22). They ultimately relate to corporate worship.

Finally, we should also note that each of the commands of this section are in the present tense or aspect of continual action. By the nature of the verbs used and the context, they are calling for customary or habitual action on the part of all believers. These are godly patterns that should characterize all Christians. Two of the commands (vss. 19-20) occur in a construction (the present imperative plus the negative me,,) which can call for an action or behavior to stop. This will be discussed when dealing with these verses.

Instructions in Relation to All (vss. 14-15)

Admonish the Undisciplined (vs. 14a)

“Admonish” is *noutheteo*, as described above. “The undisciplined” is *ataktos*, “out of order, out of place, undisciplined.” In this context it undoubtedly refers to those who refuse to work, loafers, and who are living in a state of idleness. See comments on 4:11-12. These people needed informed admonishment which not only disapproved of their conduct, but demonstrated how such behavior was wrong and out of order with the principles of the Scripture God has designed for the blessing and orderly function of society.

Comfort the Discouraged (vs. 14b)

“Discouraged” is the *oligopsuchychos*, which literally means “small souled.” It means “fainthearted, despondent, discouraged.” These are those who, looking at circumstances or problems, tend to give up and throw in the towel. They are those who lack optimism and faith in what God is doing and is able to do. They need encouragement. The word translated “comfort” is the Greek *paramutheomai*. Paul used it in 2:11 when he discussed his loving concern for the Thessalonians as a father who exhorts and encourages his children. *Paramutheomai* points to the work of encouraging someone to continue on a specific course when faced with discouraging or perplexing problems. It works to promote endurance and staying power by helping others to get their eyes on the Lord and the principles and promises of His Word.

Help the Weak (vs. 14c)

“Help” is a verb (*antecho*,,) which literally means (1) “cling to, hold fast to something or someone, be devoted to,” and then (2) “to be interested in, pay attention to,” but as here, in the sense of “giving support, help.”

“Weak” is *asthene*,,s, from *sthenoo*,,, “to strengthen.” With the negative prefix *a* (not) it means “without strength, weak, powerless.” It is used of both physical and spiritual weakness, and the context must determine its meaning. Paul does not define the exact weakness, but in the context he is obviously talking about the spiritually weak.

“Help the weak” almost certainly relates to moral and spiritual debility. Whether it was weakness in shrinking from persecution (3:3-5), yielding to temptations to immorality (4:3-8), or some other kind of weakness cannot be precisely determined. It may well have been weakness in exercising full Christian liberty in doubtful matters as was the case in other churches that included people from a pagan background (Rom 14:1-15:6; 1 Cor 8-10). Whatever it was, however, the strong in faith were responsible to support those who were weak.⁹

Asthene,,s is a member of a family of words used for spiritual weakness. These include the noun *astheneia*, the verb *astheneo*,, the noun *asthene*,,ma, and the adjective *asthene*,,s. A study of these words in the New Testament yields the following:

(1) There is a spiritual weakness caused by the natural inability of the flesh in contrast to the enablement given by the Spirit (Matt. 26:41; Rom. 6:19; 8:3). In this regard, some are weak in that they are unable to control the appetites or impulses of the body and struggle with life-dominating habits, patterns, or some particular sin (see

⁹ Gaebelein, electronic media.

Gal. 6:1f.; and also Jam. 5:13-20). James 5:13ff. is generally related to physical weaknesses or infirmities, but there is good evidence James is speaking about spiritual weaknesses of the kind just mentioned.¹⁰

(2) There is a *weakness* related to a lack of courage to trust God in the difficulties of life (Rom. 4:8). Abraham is an example of one who was strong in faith.

(3) There is a *weakness* related to a lack of the knowledge and will of God. This may relate to our inability to know how to pray in many situations of life that all Christians face (Rom. 8:26). More prominently, however, *weakness* is a problem related to knowing, understanding, and relating one's life to the Word of God in faith. Some, because they are weak in the faith (the body of revealed truth) and do not understand their liberty in Christ, have a weak conscience and become overly scrupulous about what might be called doubtful or questionable issues (Rom. 14:1-15:1; 1 Cor. 8:1-12).

This passage in 1 Thessalonians, along with Romans 15:1-14, teaches us that Christians with such weaknesses are to be the special objects of the loving care of the whole body of Christ and not just that of a few leaders.

Be Patient Toward All (vs. 14d)

When one deals with the disorderly, the discouraged, and the weak, patience or longsuffering is certainly a needed quality. "Be patient" is the Greek *makrothumeo*, which literally means "long-tempered." It is derived from *makros*, "long," and *thumeo*, "passion, anger." It is the opposite of our term "short-tempered."

Longsuffering is that quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish; it is the opposite of anger and is associated with mercy, ...

Resistance, active or passive, to admonition, exhortation or instruction, imposes a strain upon those who seek the welfare of the saints, hence the need for this further word. Longsuffering characterizes all labour that has love for its motive, 1 Cor. 13:4.¹¹

"Toward all" draws our attention to two things. First, that all situations with all people call for longsuffering. We might feel that some situations with some people allow for the opposite, but not so. Further, it is not just the disorderly, the weak, or discouraged that require patience.

Yet these are not the only ones requiring patient treatment. All Christians ("everyone") at one time or another provokes dissatisfaction through thoughtless or even intentionally hurtful acts. They too need patient treatment. The same patience is required toward non-Christians, but reference to them is not specific until v. 15.¹²

Second, the preposition "toward" is *pros*, which is a word suggesting close fellowship. It "always implies active intercourse with"¹³ the persons involved (see Mark 9:16; John 1:1, 2; 2 Cor. 5:8; and Gal. 1:18). We must not withdraw or become aloof with those who try our patience, which is the natural tendency.

Pay Back Evil for Evil to No One (vs. 15a)

As mentioned, an outstanding feature of this section (vss. 14-22) is the triple series of short commands. The first series consists of four exhortations (verse 14) designed to help the whole body care for one another. Though verse 15 contains two more imperatives, they form an amplification of what is involved in showing the patience commanded in the fourth exhortation. These verses deal with the 'one another' responsibilities all believers have to each other in a pastoral sense. Longsuffering requires the two elements found in verse 15.

Paul begins the command against paying back evil for evil with "see that." The verb is *horao*, which fundamentally means (1) "to see, perceive, behold," then (2) "to see with the mind, perceive, discern," and (3) "experience." From this it developed the idea of (4) to see in the sense of "take heed, beware" due to the precarious conditions involved. I used to get the opportunity to go quail hunting in south Texas, and while the quail were plentiful, so were

¹⁰ See the article by Daniel R. Hayden in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 138, # 551, July 81, pp. 258ff.

¹¹ Hogg and Vine, pp. 183-184.

¹² Gaebelien, electronic media.

¹³ Hogg and Vine, p. 94.

rattlesnakes. This required extreme watchfulness for you never knew when you might stumble upon one of these critters. Just so, due to the natural bent of our own natures, we need extreme care when dealing with others. Our natural tendency to retaliate for a wrong suffered must be strongly guarded against, no matter what the injury.

We might also note that Paul moves from the second person plural, “you all see that,” to the third person singular, “no one pays back evil for evil to any one.” This stresses that the whole congregation of believers is responsible to see to this personally and corporately. See Romans 12:17-21 where Paul treats this issue in more detail.

Pursue What Is Good for One Another and for All (vs. 15b)

The above negative is now followed by the positive which reminds us of an important truth. Putting on what is good is basic to our ability to overcome or put off what is evil.¹⁴ Literally, to grasp something of the emphasis of the Greek text, Paul said, “but (strong contrast, *alla*) always the good being pursuing unto one another and to all.” The “always” is emphatic. Man’s tendency is to look for loopholes to excuse the bad behavior of taking matters into his own hands. “Good” is *agathos*, which as used here with the article as a pure substantive (to *agathon*), refers to “the good, what is good, right.” It speaks of what is intrinsically valuable, morally good and beneficial.¹⁵ This, of course, must be defined by the teaching of Scripture according to its values, priorities, and objectives.

The verb the apostle used here, “pursue,” is significant. He did not simply say, “do” or “practice,” but “**pursue.**” This is *dioko*, which means “to hasten, run, chase after, press on.” Concerning the use of this verb and its implications, Robert Thomas writes:

Diokete (“pursue”; NIV, “try”) is immeasurably more than halfhearted effort. Eager expenditure of all one’s energies is none too much in seeking to *agathon* (“the good”; NIV, “to be kind”). In place of wrong, injury, or harm dictated by a vengeful spirit, Christians must diligently endeavor to produce what is intrinsically beneficial to others, whether other Christians (“each other”) or unbelievers (“everyone else”). The seriousness of the abuse suffered is no issue. Some Thessalonians doubtless had been victims of unjustified harsh treatment, but regardless of this, a positive Christian response is the only suitable recourse. The welfare of the offender must be the prime objective.¹⁶

Instructions in Relation to Self (vss. 16-18)

With verse 16 the Apostle moved to address a number of vital responsibilities all believers have in relation to their own walk with the Lord. This forms the sure foundation needed to fulfill the previous commands through the Lord’s enablement, so now he turns to the believer’s own inner life.

The Exhortations (vss. 16-18a)

Always Rejoice (vs. 16)

Because of what we have in Christ, believers have reason to rejoice even in the face of many and variegated trials of life. Maintaining a joyful spirit is not easy, however, because it depends on our focus and faith in the Lord—His person, plan, principles, promises, and purposes as set forth in Scripture. This doesn’t mean life won’t hurt, but even in the midst of the hurts, we can rejoice because we know that God is at work and in control. Note the following:

Some of the grounds for rejoicing as Christians are: The Lord Himself (Phil. 3:1; 4:4), His incarnation (Luke 2:10), His power (Luke 12:17), His resurrection (Matt. 28:8; Luke 24:52), His presence with the Father (John 14:28), His presence with believers (John 16:22; 20:20), His ultimate triumph (John 8:56), the believer’s salvation (2 Cor. 8:2), enrollment in heaven (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3), liberty in Christ (Acts 15:31, cf. Gal. 5:1), hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2), and his prospect of eternal rewards (Matt. 5:12; Luke 6:23).

¹⁴ For more on this emphasis see Ephesians 4:22-32.

¹⁵ Bauer, Gingrich and Danker, electronic media.

¹⁶ Gaebelein, electronic media.

Some of the occasions for rejoicing for Christians are: Hearing the gospel (Acts 13:48), receiving the Lord (Luke 19:6; Acts 8:39), suffering with Christ (Acts 5:41, cf. 1 Pet. 4:13), the preaching of the gospel (Phil. 1:18), suffering for the gospel (Phil. 2:17; Col. 1:24), the conversion of sinners (Luke 15:7; Acts 15:3), the manifestation of grace (Acts 11:23), the godly walk of believers (Rom. 16:19; 2 Cor. 7:4; 3 John 3, 4), godly submission to admonition (2 Cor. 7:9), the godly order of an assembly (Col. 2:5), receiving support and fellowship (Phil. 4:10), the rejoicing of others (Rom. 12:15, 2 Cor. 7:13), hearing of the well-being of others (2 Cor. 7:16), hearing of the kindness of believers to one another (Phil. 7), honor due to others (1 Cor. 12:26), and the triumph of truth (1 Cor. 13:6).¹⁷

Paul states the paradox succinctly in 2 Corinthians 6:10:

... sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (cf. 2 Cor 12:10). The Thessalonian Christians had already suffered with joy (1 Thess 1:6), as had Paul himself (3:9). The challenge is for this joyful outlook to become constant (“always”). From a human perspective they had every reason not to be joyful—persecution from outsiders and friction among themselves. Yet in Christ they are to be more and more joyful.¹⁸

Nehemiah 8:10 states, “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Joy has its roots in a deep thankfulness for *what* God has done, is doing, will do, and for *who* God is (sovereign, merciful, faithful, omnipotent, omniscience, omnipresent, loving, etc.). As such, joy takes the burden out of toilsome service and gives strength to endure. Joy is also a part of the fruit of the Spirit’s control as described in Galatians 5:22f. It is linked with love, peace, longsuffering, and kindness. In other words, capacity to love people, be longsuffering and kind is directly related to inner joy. Thus, it is needed always.

Constantly Pray (vs. 17)

Closely associated with the ability to rejoice always is a constant prayerfulness. As mentioned, these imperatives are each in the present tense. Here, with the “always” (adialeipto,,s) it is what grammarians call an iterative or customary present of what regularly occurs. It describes prayer as an attitude which regularly breaks forth throughout the day in the various aspects of prayer—confession, praise, thanksgiving, petition for others, and personal requests to God. The term used here for pray is proseuchomai, the general term for prayer, but one that suggests the worshipful nature of prayer. It is derived from a preposition of motion and direction, pros, “to, toward,” and euchomai, “to pray.”

In Everything Give Thanks (vs. 18a)

The triplet of commands is completed with giving thanks in any and all circumstances of life. As constant rejoicing is related to prayerfulness so it is also related to a thankful heart. But how can we be thankful when situations we face are so painful? Ultimately, this boils down to understanding and trusting in the promises of Scripture and how God uses suffering as a tool in accomplishing His sovereign purposes in this life. For a brief overview of this, see *Why Christians Suffer* on our web site in the “Bible Studies / Spiritual Life” section. Again, Thomas has an excellent word here.

No combination of happenings can be termed “bad” for a Christian because of God’s constant superintendence (Rom 8:28). We need to recognize that seeming aggravations are but a temporary part of a larger plan for our spiritual well-being. Out of this perspective we can always discern a cause for thanks. In fact, failure to do this is a symptom of unbelief (Rom 1:21).¹⁹

The Justification: For This Is God’s Will ... (vs. 18b)

The statement, “for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus,” looks back to all three commands, rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. “Will” is thele,,ma, which refers more to the “gracious design” of God rather than His sovereign purpose or resolve (boule,,). Ultimately then, obeying God’s will is to submit to His designed purposes as He has revealed them to us in Scripture. Thus, the three commands here comprise only a small part of the will of God. In

¹⁷ Adapted from Hogg and Vine, pp. 187-188.

¹⁸ Gaebelein, electronic media.

¹⁹ Gaebelein, electronic media.

ourselves, we have neither the desire nor ability to accomplish His will. Our need is (1) to seek to understand what His will is by a study of His Word (Eph. 5:17; Rom. 12:1-2) and (2) to appropriate His grace by faith so that He is free to work in us both to will and do His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13; Rom. 6-8).

“In Christ Jesus” is the controlling source and motive for obeying the will of God. Apart from Him, we can no more do the will of God than we can perfectly obey the Law. Thus, He becomes the very source and motive for obedience. It is through our union with Christ that we find the capacity to fulfill the will of God.

Instructions in Relation to Worship (vss. 19-22)

At this point there is change in the responsibilities commanded. Many believe that Paul moves from personal worship to corporate worship, or life in the assembly of believers. This is believed because of the reference to prophecy and examining all things. While there is undoubtedly a shift here in this direction, this does not negate the personal application of some of these commands in other ways, as will be brought out in the exegesis. Here, then, are five short exhortations, two negative and three positive, that affect the quality of public worship.

Do Not Extinguish (Quench) the Spirit (vs. 19)

“Extinguish” is *sbennumi*, “put out (a fire), quench, extinguish.” In its other occurrences in the New Testament it refers to fire (see Matt. 12:20; 25:8; Heb. 11:34, or metaphorically, Mark 9:48; Eph. 6:16). This is clearly a prohibition against hindering the work, ministry, and gifts of the Spirit who, because of His enlightening, empowering, cleansing—and ministry of warming the hearts of His people—is sometimes likened to fire in Scripture (Matt. 3:11; Acts 2:3, 4, and see also 2 Tim. 1:6). In view of this and the prohibition of verse 20 regarding prophecies, some in the church may have been resisting the gift of prophecy, and perhaps other manifestations of the Spirit as well. As a result, some of the leadership, being more cautious and conservative, may have overreacted and prohibited the ministry of the Spirit. In Corinth, a very different scenario occurred. There the gift of prophecy was being ignored because of an overzealous emphasis on the showy gifts like speaking in tongues (see 1 Cor. 12-14).

However, because believers are called upon to walk by means of the Holy Spirit as the enabling power for the Christian life (Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:16ff.), it is possible that Paul’s statement here is general, forbidding them to check the Spirit’s ministry of controlling, refining, and convicting believers in their daily walk (see also Eph 4:30). By way of application, the prohibition is applicable to any aspect of the work of the indwelling Spirit in a Christian’s life in view of the fact that sin grieves the person of the Spirit. We can say, then, that any sin a believer refuses to confess and deal with, grieves the Spirit’s person and quenches or stifles His power.

Now a word about the negative prohibition here (vs. 19) and in the next verse. Paul employed the present imperative and the negative *me,,*. Many grammars have understood this construction to command the cessation of action already in progress, rather than, in keeping with the normal use of the present aspect of Greek verbs, to refer to the continuation of action as dictated by the nuance of the verb used and the context.²⁰ Here, then, the command would be “stop extinguishing the Spirit,” and “stop treating prophecies with contempt.” But such a meaning should only be understood if there is sufficient warrant from the context. In view of the above, it may be that here there is warrant for understanding the grammar in this way, but we should also recognize that this may simply be calling for a general prohibition that is to be an ongoing, customary pattern for believers, a command designed to develop character through the power of the Spirit.

Do Not Treat Prophecies With Contempt (vs. 20)

“Do not treat ... with contempt” is the Greek *exouthene,,*, (1) “to set at naught, disdain, despise,” (2) “reject or treat with contempt.” “Prophecies” is *prophe,,teia*, which may mean: (1) prophetic activity (Rev. 11:6), (2) the gift of prophecy, prophesying (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:10; 13:2, 8; 14:22), or (3) the utterance of the prophet, the prophetic word, the content of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:6; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 1:18; Rev. 22:7, 10, 18). In this text the noun is plural and clearly refers to utterances or messages of the many prophets that may have been in the church at Thessalonica. Concerning the gift of prophecy, Thomas L. Constable writes:

²⁰ For a thorough discussion of this issue and commands and prohibitions, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, Zondervan, 1996, pp. 714-725.

The gift of prophecy was the ability to receive and communicate direct revelations from God before the New Testament was completed (1 Cor. 13:8). Sometimes these revelations concerned future events (Acts 11:28), but often they dealt with the present (Acts 13:2). Perhaps people who had not received prophetic revelations were teaching their own views of such things as the Second Advent, with the result that prophetic revelations tended to be evaluated on superficial terms (e.g., the eloquence of the speaker) instead of on the basis of their intrinsic authority.

By way of application, Christians should not disparage any revelation that has come to the church and has been recognized as authoritative and preserved by the Holy Spirit in Scripture. The temptation to put the ideas of men on an equal footing with the Word of God is still present.²¹

To this, Robert L. Thomas adds the following:

These were separate utterances of those who in their prophetic office proclaimed the will and command of God as well as predicted the future (Acts 11:28). Benefits from these utterances could build up a local church (1 Cor 14:3).

Apparently, however, certain “idle” brothers (v. 14; cf. 4:11, 12) had misused this gift by falsifying data regarding the Lord’s return. This had soured the remainder of the flock against prophecy in general. Their tendency now was not to listen to any more prophetic messages, but to discount them in view of counterfeit utterances they had heard. Once again Paul warns against overreaction and urges the church to give prophecies their proper place in edifying its members (cf. v. 11).^{22, 23}

Examine All Things (vs. 21a)

Since false prophets would arise as the Lord Himself warned (cf. Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; see also 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1), there must be careful discernment of the message or utterances of a prophet. Thus, Paul balanced the preceding with this positive command. “All things” (panta) is a neuter accusative plural rather than an accusative masculine, “every person.” The ultimate issue is the message, not the person, his claims or personality. “Examine” is dokimazo,, “to put to the test, examine,” and then, based on the result of the test, “to accept as approved, approve.” Here is a warning against gullibility and a call for biblical discernment. No criteria, however, are given by the Apostle upon which the test is to be made. As with those in Berea (Acts 17:11), the index for what is truly from God is the Word of God itself. For these early believers this included the Old Testament and the traditions handed down by the apostles (see 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6). It naturally centered in a biblical view of Jesus as both the Christ and Lord (see 1 John 4:1; 1 Cor. 12:3).

In 1 Corinthians 12:10 and 14:29 discernment is a specific spiritual function in combination with the gift of prophecy. It consists of an ability to discern whether another prophetic spokesman has given a genuinely inspired utterance. But perhaps these two tests are too specialized for the present context, and preference should be given a more general criterion of whether a positive contribution to the body’s edification and mutual love has been made.²⁴

For us today, this is a call to examine all preaching and teaching in light of the Scripture. Just because one opens his Bible and preaches from it does not mean the message is truly biblical. There is far too much Scripture twisting and abuse of the Bible in view of one’s own personal agendas or biases. Perhaps nothing is more difficult than to skillfully handle the Word (2 Tim. 2:15) so that we put away our own preconceived understanding and theological

²¹ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

²² Gaebelien, electronic media.

²³ For a discussion on the cessation of the gift of prophecy, see “Prophecy Rediscovered? A Review of the Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today,” Robert L. Thomas, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 149, # 593, Jan. 1992; “Contemporary Issues in the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit—Part IV: Today,” John F. Walvoord, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 130, # 520, Oct.-Dec., 1973; “The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts,” John F. Walvoord, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 143, # 570, April-June, 1986; “Is the Gift of Prophecy for Today?,” F. David Farnell, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Part I, Vol. 149, # 595, July-Sept., Part II, Vol. 149, # 596, Oct.-Dec. 1992. See also Farnell’s article in Vol. 150, # 597, Jan.-March 1993.

²⁴ Gaebelien, electronic media.

biases. Our only authority for the truth is God's Revelation, His Word; but if what we believe or if our understanding of a particular passage is based on our bias rather than on what the passage really says, then we have deceived ourselves and maybe even those who listen to us.²⁵ This is one of the reasons God places a greater responsibility on teachers (Jam. 3:1).

Hold Fast to What Is Good (vs. 21b)

Obviously, then, once what is heard is discovered to be "the good," i.e., true and in accord with the revelation of God in Christ, we are to tenaciously hold on to it, for God's revelation alone is a sure foundation and an anchor of the soul. "Hold fast" (katecho,,), as used in this context, means "to hold fast to in the sense of retain and guard." The very nature of this word calls our attention to the fact this will not be easy. Satan and the world will constantly seek to undermine the truth and teaching of Scripture (see Jude 3). "Good" is kalos, which carries the idea of valuable, profitable, useful and describes the inherent value and profit of the Word (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17). We should also note that it is the Word that enables us to discern what is truly good and valuable in matters not only of doctrinal and moral right, but also in practice (see Heb. 5:13-14).

Stay Away From Every Form of Evil (vs. 22)

Here is one of those verses that has not only been wrenched out of its context, but twisted by many, due in part to the translation of the KJV, "Abstain from every appearance of evil." This suggests the idea that we should avoid what even appears to be evil, though it may not in reality be evil. This command must not be wrested from its context. It comes as an antithesis and a means of strengthening the preceding, "hold on to the good." Rather than simply, "stay away from the evil," we have "stay away from every form of evil." The contrast is not between what is really good and what only appears as evil, but what is in reality evil as a result of the testing.

The word "appearance" is eidos (eì\do"), "appearance, form, kind." Commenting on this verse and this word, F. Bruce writes:

The sense of "species" or "kind" for eì\do" is quite classical ... and is attested far beyond the classical period (cf. Eusebius *HE* 5.1.6, pa'n eì\do" ojneidismou', "every kind of abuse"). The present injunction could also refer to prophetic utterances; indeed, it is possible to treat ponhrou' as attributive to eì\dou" (rather than as a genitive dependent on it) and translate "abstain from every evil kind (of utterance)." An utterance which is "evil" would be one running contrary to gospel faith and practice; such an utterance is to be rejected ...²⁶

Thus, believers must examine everything carefully and avoid that which does not conform to the truth. There will be many professed spiritual manifestations that do not contribute but rather detract from the development of spiritual growth and progress in the faith. Such the Apostle defines as pantos eidous ponerou ("every kind of evil"). As a further application of this command, using the truth as our index for testing, believers are to avoid every kind or form of evil in thought and deed, everything that might produce beliefs and behavior contrary to the kind of living promoted by the previous commands.

²⁵ See Dan Wallace's article in the Prof's Soapbox on our web site entitled, "1 Thess. 5:22: The Sin Sniffers Catch All Verse."

²⁶ Bruce, p. 126.

Lesson 11: The Concluding Remarks (5:23-28)

A Final Petition (5:23-24)

5:23 Now may the God of peace make you completely holy and may your spirit and soul and body be kept entirely blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. **5:24** He who calls you is trustworthy, and he will in fact do this.

The Basic Petition: Complete Sanctification (5:23a)

“May the God of peace Himself make you completely holy.” In a world that is so totally contrary and alienated to the holiness of God, the theme of sanctification is a critical concern for the Christian who, though not of the world, is left to represent the Lord in this alien environment. Thus, the Apostle begins his conclusion of this epistle with a concern that he has mentioned before (3:13; 4:3, 4, 7, 8).

The “now” (Greek *de*) of verse 23 is slightly transitional and moves the reader to another point, though not totally unrelated to the preceding. In the preceding verses there has been one admonition after another relating to the spiritual walk corporately and individually. Each of these commands embrace the believer’s sanctification. How is it possible for us to accomplish such commands with any sense of consistency? Paul has already related the process of sanctification to the Holy Spirit in 4:1-8, but with this final petition, he again points us to the only true source of spiritual growth and change—the awesome sanctifying work of God Himself to whom we must all turn.

(1) The Greek text literally says, “Now may the God of peace *Himself* sanctify you.” “Himself” is emphatic (the intensive use of *autos*) suggests “Himself and no other.” What an awesome lesson for ministry and the desire to see spiritual change whether in ourselves or in others. While this should never lessen our concern, personal discipline, and hard work in working with others, grasping this truth should cause us to turn away from manipulative tactics and appeal to the only One who can work in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phi. 2:13).

(2) With the words, “the God of peace,” the Apostle focuses on both the person and work of God—He is the “God of peace.” This may have been brought to mind by concerns for conditions at Thessalonica. Regardless, here is a very familiar expression in the New Testament (see Rom. 15:33; 16:20; Phil. 4:9; Heb. 13:20 and cf. John 16:33; 1 Cor. 14:33; 2 Cor. 13:11; 2 Thess. 3:16; and Isa. 9:6). They had come to have peace with God (see Rom. 5:1), with one another (see Phil. 4:9; Col. 3:15), and in their own hearts through the gospel message that brought them into a vital relationship with the Savior, the Prince of Peace, the Peacemaker (see Phil. 1:7; Eph. 2:14-17). As the God of peace, He is the source of peace. If we are to know real peace, we must know God through Christ (see John 14:27).

(3) With the words, “may God ... make you holy” or “sanctify you,” we see the faith and heart of the Apostle and his missionary team (see Col. 1:28-29). The verb here is in the optative mood, the mood of a strong wish that expresses the Apostle’s humility (only God can do this) and his expectation and desire for these and all believers. Sanctification is the work of God accomplished through His Word and the ministry of the Spirit. No matter how hard we may attempt to keep the principles of God’s Word as set forth in the previous verses (5:1-22), or preach and teach that Word to others, prayerful dependence on the Lord is absolutely vital to the process. Because he recognized and believed in this principle, the Apostle began this epistle with thanksgiving for the work of God in the Thessalonians and now he concludes with the same attitude of faith, not in man’s efforts, but in the Lord. We may sow and water, but only God *Himself* can give the increase—true growth and spiritual change (1 Cor. 3:5-9).

(4) The design and work of God is also stressed by the use of *chiasmus*. This is a literary device that refers to an inverted parallelism or sequence of words or ideas in a phrase or clause, sentence, paragraph, chapter, or even an entire book or work. The term *chiasmus* or *chiasm* is derived from the Greek letter chi (Ϸ) which is a mark with two lines that cross. A chiasm can be very complex or simple as here. There are two elements involved, *inversion* and *balance* with the goal of focusing on a particular theme or point. In this there is often a repetition of ideas by which the first and last elements of the first half of a clause or sentence are inverted in the second half. This draws attention

to the central terms and focus of the words used. It therefore presupposes a center, a “crossing point.” The words in italics and bold letters illustrate this. Note how the verbs are first and last with the goal or request in the middle forming a crossing pattern. This may be illustrated in different ways, but the following arrangement has been chosen to illustrate the focus of the actual word order and arrangement of the Greek text.

Now the God of peace Himself, **may (He) sanctify**
you *completely*
and *entirely* your spirit and soul and body *blamelessly*
may (they) be kept at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is the subject of “sanctify” and the unspecified agent of “may be kept.” By the above arrangement with the verbs first and last and the objects in the middle, the source and effective cause are somewhat emphasized. The central focus, however, is on the expressed design of complete sanctification at the coming of the Lord. This was not only the great object of Paul’s prayer, but it expresses God’s purpose for all believers (see Rom. 8:28-29), and that which should likewise be our great desire and commitment as Christians.

The Words “make you holy” or “sanctify” (NASB, NIV) translate the Greek *hagiasai*, the aorist optative of *hagiazō*, “to set apart, make holy, sanctify.” In its unaffected meaning, the aorist is the undefined tense from the standpoint of its aspect or action. It may, however, look at the beginning of action, its conclusion or culmination, or it may view the action in its entirety depending on the context and the nuance of the verb used. Since Paul was writing to believers, those who are already “saints,” or “set apart ones” in Christ positionally (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2), the focus here is on the culmination of the present process of sanctification (spiritual growth) to be culminated at the parousia, the coming of the Lord.

“Completely” is *holoteleōs*, “quite complete, without damage, through and through.”¹ This word occurs only here in the New Testament. It signifies complete in reference to degree or amount from the standpoint of the aim or design. Some believe this word may focus on the qualitative side with the word below looking at the quantitative element.²

The Particulars of the Petition: Spirit, Soul, and Body Kept Blameless (5:23b)

Having set down the general goal that the Apostle desired for these and all believers, he then particularized the process to stress even more emphatically the total sanctification God wants for all believers. “And” introduces us to the further details. The very next word in Greek is *holoklēros*, “complete, sound in every part.” With that, man’s entire makeup is focused on—spirit, soul, and body.

What the Apostle means by this three-fold division of the believer is the big question of this passage which has been the object of a tremendous amount of debate among theologians and Bible students for a long time. Robert L. Thomas has an excellent summary of some of the various explanations for the Apostle’s expression, “spirit and soul and body.”

1. Paul intends no systematic dissection of human personality. Instead, he uses a loose rhetorical expression emphasizing the totality of personality and reinforcing “through and through” and “whole” (H.W. Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1926], pp. 108-109). This view leans heavily on comparable expressions in Deuteronomy 6:5; Mark 12:30; and Luke 10:27 (e.g., “with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength,” Mark 12:30). What it fails to explain, however, is why Paul did not use this already well-known formula for completeness, if that is what he meant. It also cannot explain why he included man’s material part (“body”), which the alleged analogous passages do not include. It is contrary to Paul’s acknowledged careful use of words to attribute such a rhetorical device to him (Ellicott, p. 84; Hiebert, p. 252).

2. Another explanation makes “spirit” and “soul” interchangeable and sees each of them as referring to man’s immaterial substance. “Body” then completes the picture by referring to man’s mate-

¹ Bauer, Gingrich and Danker, electronic media.

² Gaebelein, electronic media.

rial part: “your whole spirit (i.e., soul) and body.” This sees man as dichotomous. Two terms for the same immaterial substance simply view it according to its two functions, relationship to God and relationship to the lower realm of sensations, affections, desires, etc. (Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 483). Defense of this approach lies in the way Paul parallels *pneuma* (“spirit”) with *psyche* (“soul”) in Philippians 1:27 and speaks at times of man’s make-up as bipartite (2 Cor 7:1). Also, body and soul (or spirit) together sometimes describe the whole man (Matt 10:28; 1 Cor 5:3; 3 John 2) (Strong, p. 483). The weakness in the above arguments is evident, however, because Paul sometimes parallels *pneuma* with *sarx* (“flesh,” “body”), with which it cannot be identical (2 Cor 2:13; 7:5, 13). Clear-cut distinctions between *psyche* and *pneuma* indicate they cannot be used interchangeably (Cremer, *Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, pp. 504-505). In addition, it is doubtful whether Paul would pray for man’s functional capabilities, as this view holds, rather than two substantial parts of man’s make-up.

3. Others try to escape a threefold division by dividing the last sentence of v. 23 either into two independent parts (Hendriksen, p. 150) or else by joining “may your whole spirit” with the first part of the verse (Stempvort, cited by Best, p. 243). The former alternative requires inserting words that are not in v. 23b, while the latter is unnecessarily complicated and causes prohibitive grammatical difficulties (Best, p. 243). To fill out the sense of either of these explanations, words must also be omitted.

4. That Paul saw man as a threefold substance in this verse has been generally recognized since the early fathers. The symmetrical arrangement of three nouns with their articles and their connection by means of two “ands” (*kai*) renders this the most natural explanation. This becomes a “distinct enunciation of three component parts of the nature of man” (Ellicott, p. 84). That Paul elsewhere does not make such a distinction (Best, pp. 242-244; Hendriksen, pp. 146-147) is no argument against trichotomy. It is always possible that Paul has been misunderstood elsewhere. It is also conceivable that he did not endeavor to make specific distinctions in other letters as he does here. That Paul possibly depends on liturgical formulation and attaches no special meaning to these separate terms (Dibelius, cited by Best, p. 244) is also inconclusive speculation. To object that this interpretation reads in the trichotomy of secular psychology (Schweizer, TDNT, 6:435) neglects Paul’s occasional acceptance of portions of secular philosophy that were valid. He simply incorporated them into a divinely inspired framework (Ellicott, p. 84). A trichotomous understanding of 5:23 has so much to commend it that other interpretations cannot compete without summoning arguments from elsewhere. The difference between the material part (“body”) and the immaterial parts (“spirit” and “soul”) is obvious. Paul’s pronounced distinction between *psychikos* (“natural”; NIV, “without the spirit”) and *pneumatikos* (“spiritual”) (1 Cor 2:14, 15; 15:44), his differentiation of *pneuma* (“spirit”) and *ego* (“self”) or *nous* (“mind”), parts of *psyche* (“soul”) (Rom 7:17-23; 1 Cor 14:14), and other writers’ distinguishing of *pneuma* and *psyche* (James 3:15; Jude 19) argue heavily for a substantial, not just a functional, difference between the two immaterial parts (Hiebert, p. 252; Schweizer, TDNT, 6:436; Lightfoot, p. 88).

The spirit (*pneuma*) is the part that enables man to perceive the divine. Through this component he can know and communicate with God. This higher element, though damaged through the fall of Adam, is sufficiently intact to provide each individual a consciousness of God. The soul (*psyche*) is the sphere of man’s will and emotions. Here is his true center of personality. It gives him a self-consciousness that relates to the physical world through the body and to God through the spirit. This analysis of man had been Paul’s training in the OT and no impressive evidence has surfaced to eradicate such a picture here (Milligan, p. 78; Olshausen, p. 457). Yet, it must be confessed, much unresolved mystery remains regarding the interrelationships between man’s different parts, including the body. How one affects the other is fully understood only by him who is the Creator.

For such a composite creature Paul therefore prays, seeking an unblamable wholeness in the presence “of our Lord Jesus Christ” (23; cf. 2:19; 3:13).³

³ Gaebelein, electronic media.

Regardless of one's view of this passage, clearly, the emphasis is on the completeness of the sanctification that God is committed to promoting in the believer in all aspects of his being.

The word "blameless," *amempto,s*, meaning "free from blame," is an adverb and modifies the verb "kept." "Kept" is *te,reo,,* which means (1) "keep, guard, watch over," and (2) "keep, hold, preserve someone." In this last sense, it has the following uses: (a) "keep for a definite purpose or suitable time" (1 Pet. 1:4; 2 Pet. 2:4), and (b) "keep unharmed, protected, preserved with an emphasis on the condition that is to be kept unharmed or sound" (1 Cor. 7:37; 1 Tim. 6:14; 1 Tim. 5:22; 1 Thess. 5:23).⁴ What is kept is the "whole spirit, soul, and body," the complete person. Though not expressed, God is the one doing the keeping. This expresses the Apostle's dependence on the Lord to accomplish this keeping work in believers.

But what is involved and what is the goal? This is a desire for greater and greater maturity so that at the *parousia*, when believers are made manifest before the Judgment Seat of Christ, they will be without blame not merely in conduct before men, but in heart before the Lord Himself (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:13).

"At the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" should not be understood as "until His coming" as translated by the KJV. The focus is on the believer's spiritual state at the time of the rapture.

The Basis for the Petition: The Faithfulness of God (5:24)

"He who calls you is trustworthy, and he will in fact do this."

Literally, to show Paul's emphasis, the text reads, "Faithful *is* the One Who calls you, Who also will do it." All the principles and promises of Scripture and our confidence in prayer stand on the character of God's person. So, the trustworthiness of God is here brought into focus. "Faithful" is *pistos*, "trustworthy, faithful, dependable, inspiring trust."⁵ But God is also described as "the One Who calls you." The point is that the call of God to save believers and bring them into a vital relationship with Himself does not end His loving care. In His character as faithful, He continues His work to produce spiritual growth and change. As the One who calls and justifies by grace, so He sanctifies by grace too.

A Final Postscript (5:25-28)

5:25 Brothers and sisters, pray for us too. **5:26** Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.

5:27 I call on you solemnly in the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters. **5:28**
The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Here the Apostle concludes with three requests and a final benediction. **First, as Paul had prayed for the growth and sanctifying grace of God for the Thessalonians, so he asked for their prayers for the missionary team.** Here was a very gifted committed missionary team yet they too needed the sanctifying and preserving power of God. All believers alike need the prayer support of the body of Christ regardless of how mature and gifted they may appear. As one always oriented to grace and dependent on the Lord, Paul, as he so often did, sought spiritual support from his converts (Rom. 15:30; Eph 6:19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3; 2 Thess. 3:1; Philemon 22).

Second, Paul called for a greeting among all the brethren or the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.

Paul's usual "one another" (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; cf. 1 Peter 5:14) is replaced this time by an expression that may imply that the request is addressed to leaders only. This need not distinguish leaders from the rest of the assembly, however, as the Epistle will eventually find its way to all (v. 27). In the meantime those receiving it first were to greet the rest (Moffatt, p. 43). The symbol of greeting was "a holy kiss" (v. 26). This was not a kiss of respect as was used in ancient times to honor men of authority. Neither was it cultic as though copied from an ancient mystery religion. It most closely parallels the use of a kiss among members of the same family as a token of their close relationship. Christians have come into the family of God, which knows even closer ties than those of any human family (Matt 12:46-50). It was quite appropriate that a sym-

⁴ Bauer, Gingrich and Danker, electronic media.

⁵ Bauer, Gingrich and Danker, electronic media.

bolic greeting be adopted. It was to be “holy” (*hagio*), i.e., such as is becoming to saints (*hagiois*, 3:13). This may have been the custom of men kissing men and women kissing women so as to forestall any suspicion of impropriety. A Jewish synagogue practice, it could easily have found its way into early Christian assemblies.⁶

Third, his final request is very strong and demonstrates a deep concern on the Apostle’s part to see that this epistle was read in the assembly. In the first two requests, he used the imperative mood of command common throughout this last section, but here he switched to a formula that basically consisted of placing someone under oath. “I call on you solemnly” is *enorkizo*,,, “to adjure, cause or call on someone to swear,” “to bind by an oath.” To add to the force of this adjuration, he does so by the name and authority of the Lord. Finally, while the “you” is specified, this more than likely refers to the leadership in keeping with the normal responsibilities of elders in the local church. The word for “read” is *anagino*,,sko,, which is often used of the public reading of Scripture (see Luke 4:16; Acts 15:21; 2 Cor. 3:15; and see the noun *anagno*,,sis at 1 Tim. 4:13; Acts 13:15).

But why the change in intensity here? Because the Apostle knew the importance of the truths presented in this epistle for it is God’s truth He uses to transform lives (John 17:17). In commenting on the various reasons for Paul’s change of tone here, Thomas comments:

Very probably Paul sensed the far-reaching import of the teaching of the Epistle and its binding authority as part of a canon of Scripture (1 Cor 14:37). Whatever the case, this charge has implications of divine punishment for failure to comply. The first recipients of the letter, probably the church leaders, were bound under oath “to have this letter read to all the brothers.”

Obviously it was to be read aloud, in line with the classical meaning of *anaginosko* (“read”). Under restrictions of limited educational privilege, not all participants in Christian circles were able to read for themselves. The further limitation of insufficient copies and expense of writing materials prohibited distribution to all. The only solution was to give the Epistle a place in public worship alongside the OT Scripture, the consequence of which would eventually be ecclesiastical recognition of its authority as an inspired book.⁷

Finally, with verse 28, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you,” the epistle is brought to a close. The epistle began with the note of grace and ends with the same note. We cannot live apart from God’s grace. It is the grace of the Lord Jesus that makes our salvation and sanctification possible from start to finish.

That the Lord Jesus should be presented as the source of grace ... , either alone, as here, cf. Acts 15:11, or in association with God, 2 Ep. 1:12, is significant testimony to His Deity.⁸

Conclusion

As we have seen, in every chapter of this epistle, the coming of the Lord Jesus has been a very prominent focus (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:10; 5:23). Further, it is the conviction of this author that this is an imminent coming, the blessed hope. Regardless of one’s view of this, however, both the fact of His coming and the events following His coming for the body of Christ are certain. This life is not the end; it is only the beginning. It is a stage of preparation for eternity where all believers will be with Christ for eternity and, if they are faithful in their walk and growth with the Savior, they will also have the awesome privilege of reigning with Christ. These are facts promised us by the Word of God, and such promises and their reality should encourage us to live for the Lord, not in our own strength, but in His. The sure coming of the Lord should encourage us to study the Word, pray, faithfully assemble together for fellowship, worship, the preaching and teaching of Scripture, to love the brethren, and many other biblical responsibilities. All of this we should do knowing that it is the Lord who sanctifies and keeps us, and who will strengthen us both to will and do of His good pleasure.

⁶ Gaebelein, electronic media.

⁷ Gaebelein, electronic media.

⁸ Hogg and Vine, p. 217.