

THE THESALONIAN LETTERS

a systematic study

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PREFACE

THIS STUDY OF THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS originated as my prepared notes for teaching our local ABF (Adult Bible Fellowship) class on Sunday mornings. As with the other resources at our web site, we make it available to others simply because it already exists. I make no claim to scholarship, special insight, or extraordinary understanding of God's holy word. I have been called in the local assembly to teach (predominantly) senior adults from God's word. Following the example of the early churches, those of us in the kingdom are encouraged to "[share our possessions] with all, as anyone might have need." (Acts 2:45) If others can benefit from this study, then all the better.

Different from some of our earlier published studies, this Thessalonians study has not been overly modified or formatted, but is published in essentially the format of my original notes used in class. Scripture text has not been added after-the-fact; use these notes with your own Bible alongside.

As with all of our resources, we offer this free of charge, to the glory of God the Father, and the praise of Jesus Christ our Lord.

*David S. Lampel
Winterset, Iowa
August 2017*

EXPLANATIONS

SCRIPTURE VERSIONS

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Greek and Hebrew citations are from *Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary*, and the *NASB Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*.

ABBREVIATIONS

NASB: *New American Standard Bible*

NKJV: *New King James Version*

KJV: *King James Version*

KJVS: Both *King James Version* and *New King James Version*

NIV: *New International Version*

RSV: *Revised Standard Version*

YLT: *Young's Literal Translation*

ESV: *English Standard Version*

OT, NT: *Old Testament, New Testament*

SESSION 1: LETTERS

Overview

PREFACE

It is no accident that so much of what we believe, so much of what we understand about the teachings of Christ, so much about how we are to conduct ourselves as believers comes to us through the medium of written correspondence.

Just this last week Linda began the process of clearing out the dresser in our guest bedroom filled with my mom's papers and mementos. It has been seven years now since she went home to be with the Lord (at the age of 90), so it was about time to sort through and discard things.

Mixed in with all the greeting cards, church bulletins, and hospital invoices were some letters from Linda and me to her, written over the decades since the early eighties. Reading through some of these, I was struck by their value as historical documents—as a window onto a point in time.

- In these letters I wrote to Mom I could tell where my priorities were at the time, my interests, my mood—what things were bringing me joy, and what things were a point of sorrow or agitation or frustration.
- I was reminded of the love I felt for Mom, my concern for her—especially since losing Dad in 1979.
- In these letters I would sometimes offer advice and counsel to Mom, which was something she both appreciated and needed.

In the letters that comprise most of the New Testament—two of which will be the subject of this study—we have much the same thing.

- In First and Second Thessalonians Paul makes clear his priorities for the church; from the content we can also discern his mood—what things were bringing him joy, what things were bringing sorrow or agitation or frustration.
- His love for the church is expressed, and his concern for her, as its members did battle with those who would lead them astray.
- In these two letters the apostle offers counsel and guidelines for the health and well-being of the church.

From all of this, we learn along with the Thessalonians, but we also learn about Paul himself; it is a window onto the life not just of a church, but of the man who loved them.

BACKGROUND

The apostle Paul made two trips to Thessalonica: the first during his second missionary journey, and (though it is not explicitly confirmed by name) his second visit during his third missionary journey, during which he revisited the churches in Macedonia. Shortly after his first visit to the city, and the founding of the church, he wrote the two letters we know as First and Second Thessalonians. By most accounts, only a matter of a few months separated the writing of the two letters.

First Thessalonians is the earliest *known* letter written to any church by Paul. [\[Others are hinted at, but this is the earliest included in the canon.\]](#) His second letter to the church was written probably just a few months after the first. Both were written while he was at Corinth, around AD 50.

Getting our Bearings

Writer and professor J. R. R. Tolkien was reported to have said that the first thing to do before telling a story is to draw a map. So let's get our bearings before we dig into what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. [\[refer to map on next page\]](#)

This map shows us the Mediterranean region, with Paul's first and second missionary journey's marked. It also gives us the geographical relationship between Israel and Macedonia, where Thessalonica was a major city. Let's pick up Paul's journey at Troas, the westernmost city of Asia Minor. On our map it is found in the upper left of the reddish area marked "Asia." Trace the route as we read the passages from Acts.



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Read Acts 16:6-10.

Read Acts 16:11-12.

As we all know from Sunday School, while in Philippi Paul and Silas had a spot of trouble, and ended up in chains in the town jail. Upon declaring the following day that, as Roman citizens, they had been publicly mistreated, the magistrates begged them to get out of town forthwith.

Read Acts 17:1.

There was trouble in Thessalonica, as well. But before that he had some success. Paul spoke at the synagogue and his words bore fruit.

And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. (Acts 17:4)

But then some other Jews took issue with what Paul was preaching—especially regarding Jesus as king. Some things never change, and these troublemakers, just as today, employed just a smidgen of hyperbole to make their accusation.

When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” (Acts 17:6-7)

“the world” = the whole inhabited earth

So, as we read in v10, “The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas” off to Berea, where they enjoyed a better reception, because the Bereans “were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica.” Again, just as today, eventually outside agitators came into Berea—Jews from Thessalonica—and stirred things up against the apostle. So, once again, Paul had to leave town—this time to Athens.

What we can glean from this account is that Thessalonica was a mixed bag for Paul. There were three groups that responded favorably to Paul’s teaching:

- Jews from the synagogue;
- God-fearing Greeks, and;
- a “number of the leading women.”

But there was also much opposition from the Jewish community in the city—opposition sufficiently fertile and intense that it wasn’t enough for them that they ran Paul out of their own town; they traveled to Berea to stir things up against him there.

Paul’s Stay in Thessalonica

One more detail before we move on: A cursory reading of Acts 17 leaves the impression that Paul was in Thessalonica for only a few weeks before he was driven away to Berea. But that is unlikely when we add up the evidence.

- As we would say today, Paul was “bi-vocational” while in Thessalonica. He either set up shop, or found employment with someone else—probably something associated with his trade of tent-making.
-

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10.

It would have been difficult to establish this, do the work, and describe it in this way if his visit had been for only for two or three weeks.

- As we will see, the evidence is that by the time he left Thessalonica the church there was strong and thriving—“not one still in throes of separation from the local synagogue” (Robert L. Thomas).
- Before he left, Paul had received two gifts of funds from Philippi, which was one hundred miles away.

Read Philippians 4:15-16.

When you add all this up, it seems likely that Paul remained in Thessalonica for at least several months.

Thessalonica was the principal city of Macedonia, situated as it was at the junction of two main trade routes, and had an excellent natural harbor. [\[refer to map\]](#) Its population was probably around 200,000—comprised mostly of Greeks, Romans, and Jews.

WHY STUDY THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS

Let's get right down to it, and ask the most fundamental question for any study: ***Why should we study the Thessalonian letters?*** That is, *What will this study contribute to our knowledge of Christ and/or Father God, and what will it contribute to our life, and walk of faith in Christ Jesus? What do we hope to gain?* Let's close with a brief survey of what Paul teaches in these two letters.

In the Thessalonian letters we learn

- what it means for a church (and of course, its individual members) to be spiritually healthy: **I,1:6-10**; but also
- how to become even healthier in holiness: **I,4:7**;
- the qualities and behavior of a righteous, loving leader: **I,2:10-12**;
- details found nowhere else regarding the end times, or *eschatology*: **II,2:1-4**; and, not least,
- how we should be living until that day arrives: **II,2:15**.

In addition, Paul addresses a number of theological, doctrinal topics:

- the inspiration and authority of Scripture: **I,2:13**,
- the doctrine of one true God existing in three Persons: **II,1:1-2; I,4:8**,
- the deity of Christ,
- salvation based on Christ's death: **I,5:9-10**,
- the believer's identification and unity with Christ: **I,5:5**,
- sanctification and personal purity: **I,4:3-5,7**,
- vocational diligence: **I,4:11-12**,

By example, he teaches them about prayer and discipling others:

- prayer: **II,1:11-12**,
- discipling others: **I,3:1-5**.

Over all of this we have in these two letters the picture and example of a faithful shepherd always concerned for his flock, constantly praying for them, constantly doing whatever he can to bring them closer to Christ their Savior and Lord.

SESSION 2: GRACE, THANKSGIVING & REMEMBRANCE

1 Thessalonians 1:1-2

v1

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy

Most of us are familiar with the story about Paul and his traveling companions—how Barnabas traveled with him on the first missionary journey, but subsequently they had a parting of the ways because of a dispute over the reliability of John-Mark. So on the second journey Paul took with him Silas (or Silvanus).

Sidebar: In Acts, Luke consistently refers to him as Silas (Jewish name), whereas Paul always refers to him as Silvanus (Roman transliteration of Silas)

There were others along on this trip, but they were not always together. Let's briefly trace their time in Macedonia, then Achaia. [\[see map and chart on next page\]](#)

Why bother? What does this have to do with gleaned doctrine and counsel and theology from Paul's letters? Because we need to put those teachings in proper context, and we also need to remind ourselves that these were not plastic saints but flesh and blood men. We need to see them as more—and less—than mere words on a page. The more we understand their humanity, their trials, the easier it is to recognize and give credit to the Spirit of God at work in their lives. So let us humanize these men by spending just a moment looking at their itinerary and movement. This will also inform our understanding of some of the passages in the letters to the Thessalonians.

Sidebar: Invariably when it comes to chronologies, and who was where when, and with whom, opinions vary—even among respected scholars. So one can seldom be dogmatic about such things.

- Paul and Silvanus pick up Timothy in Lystra, and Luke (presumably) joins them in Troas.
- The three are together in Philippi, Thessalonica (probably), and Berea.
- While Silvanus and Timothy remain in Berea, Paul continues on to Athens alone.
- While there, Paul is very lonely, and eventually Silvanus and Timothy join him there. But then Paul sends Silvanus back to Philippi, Timothy back to Thessalonica, and Paul continues on to Corinth, where he meets Priscilla and Aquila.
- While Paul is in Corinth, Timothy and Silvanus eventually return to him—Timothy with news from Thessalonica—and Paul writes the two Thessalonian letters.

So now these three men are back together, in Corinth, and Paul eagerly responds in two letters to the information Timothy has brought him—probably dictating the letters to an amanuensis.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:17-18.

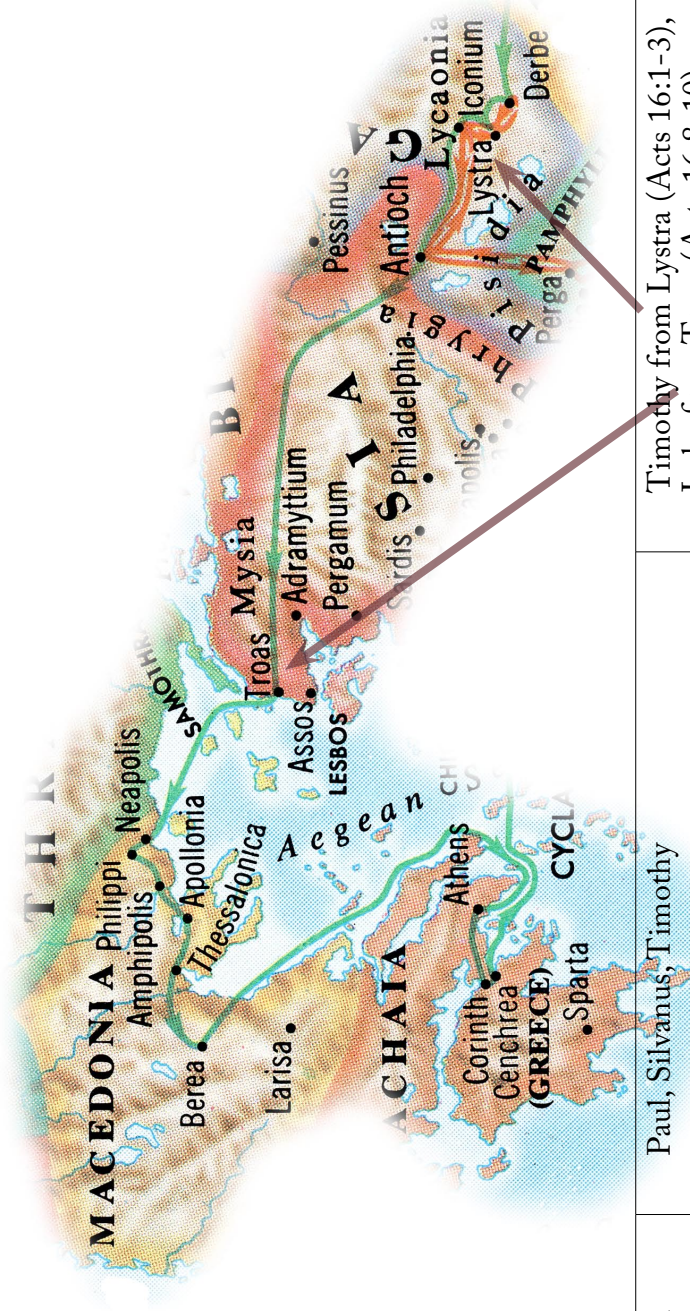
As v2:2 makes clear, Paul was concerned that the Thessalonians were getting spurious counsel from counterfeit correspondence, made to look as if from him.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2.

So here, at the close of his letter, he takes the stylus in hand and appends a closing benediction in his own hand—not just making it more personal, but using his handwriting as a stamp of authenticity against any pretenders.

[Back to the first letter.](#)

ITINERARY & MOVEMENT



In Philippi	Paul, Silvanus, Timothy	Timothy from Lystra (Acts 16:1-3), Luke from Troas (Acts 16:8-10)
In Thessalonica	Paul, Silvanus, Timothy?	
In Berea	Paul, Silvanus, Timothy	
to Athens	Paul	Silvanus and Timothy remain in Berea (Acts 17:14)
In Athens	Paul	Silvanus and Timothy arrive later (Acts 17:16)
From Athens	Silvanus sent back to Philippi (probably), and Timothy sent back to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:2)	
In Corinth	Paul, with Priscilla and Aquila	Silas and Timothy arrive later (Acts 18:5); after Timothy returns with news from Thessalonica, Paul writes the two Thessalonian letters. (1 Thessalonians 3:6)

Session 2



THE RECIPIENT OF THE LETTER

We need no better evidence than v1 that the “church” is the people, and not the building.

Read v1.

Paul wrote this letter “to the church.” Now, call me silly, but I don’t think one corresponds with a building—one corresponds with the people *in* the building.

church = *ekklesia* (ek-klay-see'-ah) = from a compound of <G1537> (ek) and a derivative of <G2564> (kaleo); **a calling out, i.e. (concretely) a popular meeting**, especially a religious congregation (Jewish synagogue, or Christian community of members on earth or saints in heaven or both) :- assembly, church.

Paul was writing to “the called-out ones” in Thessalonica. As today, this has a double meaning:

- The assembly of believers is called out from the community at large; we are, in varying degrees, separated from those who do *not* believe.
- But this also has reference to our being “called,” or chosen, by God, as Paul mentions at the end of v4:

knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;

This church was called out *from* something—and called out *to* something: this assembly of believers was called out from the world, and called out to Christ.

This verse reminds me of the time I committed one entire class session to the one, two-letter word “in”—as in, “in Christ.” Don’t worry; I’ll not subject you to that this time. But do note that this church is *in* “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

These two letters—the greeting is essentially the same in both letters—are addressed not to the Rotary Club, not to a rugby team, and not to the local Jewish synagogue, but to those justified and sanctified by the blood of Christ Jesus. They are *in* Christ, and by associating the Son with the Father, Paul is emphasizing the *deity* of Christ Jesus.

Sidebar: Robert L. Thomas points out that the reading in the KJVs of “Grace to you and peace *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” does “find support in a few strong MSS, but the shorter version finds stronger support geographically and chronologically among the witnesses, [so] is therefore preferred.” The KJVs essentially tack on to v1 of the first letter v2 of the second letter.

Now that he has designated and defined the letters’ recipients, Paul offers them his standard greeting: “Grace to you and peace.” For the apostle Paul, the standard *chairō* (translated “Greetings” in James 1:1) is not good enough. His greeting must emphasize the grace we enjoy in Christ, so he uses *charis*. And of course, it is this very *charis* that affords the Thessalonians, and us, the privilege of being *in* “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

v2

One of the pleasures of studying the letters to the Thessalonian church is that they were in pretty good shape. Rather than taking our lessons from all the mistakes they were making, we can learn from what they were doing right.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2.

Verse 2 represents Paul’s boilerplate expression of thanksgiving—not to suggest it was insincere; just standard. In fact, one way we know it was *not* insincere is the exception to the rule. When a church, such as the believers in Galatia, was not living in a way for which the apostle could give thanks, he didn’t say it.

To the Galatians he greets them with his name, he mentions Jesus Christ and God the Father, he greets them with grace and peace—but there is no thanksgiving. In its place is v6 in the Galatian letter.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; (Galatians 1:6)

No boilerplate thanksgiving there; instead, he took them to the woodshed.

So we can easily believe that when Paul said he was grateful for the believers in Thessalonica, he really meant it. And he did this repeatedly, often, at every opportunity.

making mention of you in our prayers

Let's close, today, on this last phrase in v2. I confess there are times when I feel the urge to pray, but don't know what to say. Perhaps the situation on my heart is so frustrating or confusing from an earthly perspective, that I just don't know how to put it into words. Or maybe my spirit is lethargic, or weary, and I just can't properly organize my thoughts.

Here we have Paul describing the content of *his* prayers: He gives thanks **to God** for these brothers and sisters in Christ, but he doesn't stop there. He begins to flesh this out by stating that he "mak[es] mention" of them to the Father.

Here is a word that means less in today's vernacular than it did in the first century.

mention = *mneia* (mnay'-ah) = from <G3415> (mnaomai) or <G3403> (mimnesko); **recollection**; by implication **recital**
:- mention, **remembrance**.

As Paul uses it, there is a bi-directional aspect to this word.

Backwards

In one direction, he brings to his mind and offers up to the Father his recollections of the Thessalonians—their progress in faith, their joys and sorrows, what they mean to him personally. Here are the thoughts that reinforce the intimacy between brothers and sisters in the Lord.

This word is from the same Greek stem as the word we use every month during communion: "Do this is **remembrance** of Me" (Luke 22:19). Jesus instituted this ordinance or sacrament of communion, first, that we would recall and solemnly celebrate His sacrificial act for our salvation. As we partake of the bread and the wine our thoughts are to be on Jesus, and what He did for us by willingly receiving in our stead the lash, the spikes, the agony of death on the cross.

Just so, in our prayers we are to remember—to the Lord, but *for* us—the lives and situations of those brothers and sisters He has placed on our heart.

Forwards

But there is also an intercessory component to this "mentioning." Paul is not just praying *about* the Thessalonians, but praying *for* them—for their advancement in the gospel, the development and maturing of their walk of faith, which he expands on in the following verses.

Our own prayers should be forward-looking, calling upon the Lord to work mightily in our brothers and sisters for the furtherance of their sanctification, for their maturing in Christ.

SESSION 3: REASON FOR THANKSGIVING

1 Thessalonians 1:3

PREFACE

One cannot read, or especially teach, Paul's letters for long without discovering his verbosity and longwindedness. It is all good stuff, but he can begin a sentence in verse 5 that may not end until verse 14. [In the NASB the sentence begins in v2 and ends in v5, while other translations break it up at different places. *Young's Literal Translation* does not begin a new sentence until Chapter Two!]] This makes it difficult to break down his text into bite-sized chunks. So it is not uncommon to begin a study in the middle of one of his sentences—as we will this morning.

v3

Verse 3 is where the apostle expands on what he said in v2, where he expresses his thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians. Let's include it as we read the passage.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3.

In v2 he says that they are “always...making mention” of the Thessalonians in their prayers—that is, speaking to God on their behalf. Here he says something similar—but different—that they are “constantly bearing in mind” these three qualities. The interpretation/application of this phrase is dependent on how one translates the verse—and commentators are not of one mind.

One camp is reflected in the NIV and ESV; here is the ESV:

remembering **before our God and Father** your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is, similar to what he said in v2 about making mention of them in their prayers, this interpretation makes “before our God and Father” an adverbial modifier, associating it with “remembering”—a perfectly logical expansion of v2, describing in greater detail the persistent content of their prayers on behalf of the Thessalonians.

The other camp follows the word order of the original Greek, leaving the phrase at the *end* of the verse, which is reflected in the KJVs and the NASB; here is the NASB:

constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ **in the presence of our God and Father,**

The first interpretation has the apostle and his men recollecting *to the Father* the church's qualities, whereas the second interpretation has them pointing out to the church that these qualities are being performed *in the sight of the Father*. Both certainly *can* be true, but what is the apostle saying? There is a legitimate argument to be made for the first interpretation, but I am inclined to side with the majority—and the original word order in the Greek, as seen in the KJVs and the NASB.

So Paul is saying that in addition to giving thanks to God for the Thessalonians, he and his fellows are “constantly bearing in mind” these laudable qualities.

constantly bearing in mind^{nasb}, **remembering without ceasing**^{kjvs} = *adialeiptōs* (ad-ee-al-ipe'-toce) *mnēmoneuō* (mnay-mon-yoo'-o) = **without omission recollecting or rehearsing.**

And, of course, there is acceptable hyperbole here: just as when any of us tell someone, “I’m always thinking of you,” it does not mean that twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week our mind is preoccupied with thoughts of them. It means that when their thoughts move to the churches they have planted, they never forget (omit) the Thessalonians.

In v3 Paul speaks of three qualities of the church that he never forgets:

1. Their **work** of **faith**
2. Their **labor** of **love**
3. Their **steadfastness** (enduring constancy) of **hope**

All three qualities speak of determined action springing from, motivated by the three graces that come to every believer in Christ. The direction is from the latter to the former:

faith *produces* work

love *produces* labor

hope *produces* steadfastness

The NIV, by inserting words that are not in the Greek text, expresses the idea:

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

your work of faith

Faith (*pistis*)

work = *ergou* = from a primary (but obsolete) *ergo* (to work); toil (as an effort or occupation); by implication an act :- deed, doing, labour, work; **specifically the work performed**.

We cannot ignore the circular aspect of the relationship between these graces and their results. That is, from a human perspective it is difficult to nail down a starting point. Jesus spoke of this when He was asked by some of the Jews hearing His teaching, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" (John 6:28) They were coming at Him from a typical Jewish perspective: *just tell us what we must **do** to please God*. In His answer Jesus contradicted their supposition.

Read John 6:28-29.

What is the beginning point of work that pleases God? Faith in Christ. The writer to the Hebrews wrote that, "without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." (Hebrews 11:6) But from where does faith come?

Read Ephesians 2:8-9.

A. Skevington Wood: Faith is not a quality, a virtue, or a faculty. It is not something man can produce. It is simply a trustful response that is itself evoked by the Holy Spirit.

Barclay adds, "The whole process comes from nothing that we have done or could do." So whether we speak of faith, or the work that emerges from it, it is all of grace—it is all of God.

So the work the Thessalonians were doing—we will learn the specifics of their work as we proceed through the letter—was not *saving* work (as the Jews had hoped for), nor were they *proving* their devotion by working, but it was all just the "natural" outflow of their relationship with God in Christ.

labor of love

"Work" in "work of faith" is amplified in "labor of love."

labor = *kopou* = from <G2875> (*kopto*); **a cut**, i.e. (by analogy) **toil (as reducing the strength)**, literal or figurative; by implication **pains** :- labour, + trouble, **weariness**.

This is work with "extraordinary effort expended." But this labor was expended not in digging ditches, but, oddly enough, in love. And it follows that extraordinary effort would be expended in extraordinary love—*agape* love, the highest form of love. We often think of this as *sacrificial* love—not because the Greek defines it so, but because in the NT *agape* love, like faith and grace and wisdom, is the form of love God has for man—expressed especially

in Christ Jesus. And if it is expressed horizontally in the body of Christ, its source is not earthly, but heavenly, produced by the work of God's Spirit in man.

Read Romans 5:5.

Robert L. Thomas: This is no mere emotional response prompted by the desirability of, or affinity for, the person loved, though feeling certainly is not absent from it. It is ultimately traceable to the *will* of the one who loves. He *determines* to love and does so no matter what the condition of the one loved. Such is God's love for man and so must the Christian's love for others be if "labor" for their good is to result. (*italics added*)

steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ

Woven throughout both words translated "steadfastness" and "hope" is an attitude of joy. And this is perhaps one of the more obvious lines of demarcation between the regenerate and unregenerate; those *not* in Christ, those not indwelt by the Holy Spirit, cannot understand this at all—which is why Paul specifies that their hope is grounded "in our Lord Jesus Christ," for it could be found nowhere else.

steadfastness^{nasb,esv}, **patience**^{kjvs}, **endurance**^{niv} = *hypomone* = from <G5278> (hupomeno); **cheerful (or hopeful)**
endurance, constancy :- enduring, patience, patient continuance (waiting).

hope = *elpis* = from a primary *elpo* (**to anticipate, usually with pleasure**); expectation (abstract or concrete) or **confidence** :- faith, hope.

Interestingly, we arrive at Christ Jesus from both directions in this phrase:

- we have this hope only because of Christ: His sacrificial work on our behalf, and His indwelling Spirit;
- at the same time, however, Christ is the *object* of this hope—He is the one we hope for.

in the presence of our God and Father

I earlier mentioned the two interpretations for this phrase—

- using it to indicate the direction and earnestness of Paul's prayers, as in the NIV and ESV, or
- using it to point out to the Thessalonians that these qualities of theirs are being performed *in the sight of the Father*, as in the KJVs and the NASB.

As I said, I lean toward the latter interpretation. But now we have another decision to make: if that is indeed what he is saying, to what, precisely, does Paul refer? There are two possibilities.

One would be to place this, as a number of commentators do, at Christ's return, when the church is *literally* in His presence. Paul refers to this a little later in this letter.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20.

There it is explicit; in v3 it is ambiguous—certainly possible, but, at best, implied.

Other interpreters keep this in the here and now—a position I favor, if for no other reason that it reinforces the centrality of God in our lives. We daily conduct our faith-work, our love-labor, and our hope-enabled endurance because we are always in the presence of a merciful yet holy heavenly Father.

Matthew Henry: The great motive to sincerity is the apprehension of God's eye as always upon us; and it is a sign of sincerity when in all we do we endeavour to approve ourselves to God, and that is right which is so in the sight of God. Then is the work of faith, or labour of love, or patience of hope, sincere, when it is done under the eye of God.

The apostle Paul commends the Thessalonians for this, expressing thanksgiving to God for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Which, then, leaves us with the obvious, and perhaps uncomfortable question: *Could your pastor or spiritual mentor give thanksgiving to God for your "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope"?*

SESSION 4: A LOVING CHOICE

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5

PREFACE

We are still inside Paul's formal greeting to the Thessalonian believers, but already we are learning much about them. These are not just gracious but empty words of introduction; these words comprise a biographical sketch of this church. Already we have learned that

- it is a true-gospel church, "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v1b);
- it is an active church, its members working out their faith in love, and their steadfast hope in Jesus Christ;
- their active faith is energized by the knowledge that everything they do is in the sight of (and for) their "God and Father."

Just three verses in and already we have discovered that we can learn much from this body of believers.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5.

I love the angle here. Last week Pastor Jeremy's sermon was from Luke 6:43-49; from that we learned that one way we *can* know the heart of someone is to observe the fruit of their life.

Read Luke 6:45.

Another way to know whether someone is a true disciple of Christ is to look at the conduct of their life—specifically, do they endeavor to follow the commands of Jesus, or is their "devotion" just empty words.

"Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46)

Here in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians we have one more way to know whether someone is a child of God. How did they know that the brethren were "beloved by God," and were His chosen? Because they received the word as only Christians could, "in power and in the Holy Spirit."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

v4

If we whittle down vv2-4 to the essentials, it would be

We give thanks to God for all of you . . . for your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ . . . knowing, beloved brethren, His choice of you.

How Paul was able to say this we will address in a moment; let's first consider *what* he is saying. Paul is saying two things in v4:

- God loves them, and
- God chose them

That pairing is not inconsequential, for Scripture tells us that God's love is the *basis* for His choosing.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians we have the succinct version; in his second letter Paul fleshes it out a bit more.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

I do not intend for this to be an in-depth study of election, or "predestination." But we do need to understand the concept to the extent that Paul mentions it in these letters. In the second passage he states that "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation." Which raises the question: beginning of what? We find the answer to that in Ephesians.

Read Ephesians 1:3-6.

Sidebar: The preferred translations make “In love” the beginning of the sentence in v5, rather than the end of the sentence in v4. All do this but the KJVs.

So Paul in his letter to the Ephesians clarifies that “beginning” in 2 Thessalonians means “before the foundation of the world”—i.e., before Adam. And in all three passages he includes, in one form or another, that this selection was done, by God, for no other reason than his love for us. Remember last week’s quotation by Robert L. Thomas:

This is no mere emotional response prompted by the desirability of, or affinity for, the person loved, though feeling certainly is not absent from it. It is ultimately traceable to the *will* of the one who loves. He *determines* to love and does so no matter what the condition of the one loved. Such is God’s love for man... (italics added)

So v5 in Ephesians:

In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,
(italics added)

In the list below you will find Wayne Grudem’s list (also mentioned last week) showing the steps of salvation in order. And note that first in the list is “Election.” Steps two through ten would never occur at all if not for “the kind intention of His will”—out of His love for them alone—to elect, to choose those who will belong to Him in Christ Jesus.

...knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;

1 Thessalonians 1:4

“The Order of Salvation”

1. Election (God’s choice of people to be saved)
2. The gospel call (proclaiming the message of the gospel)
3. Regeneration (being born again)
4. Conversion (faith and repentance)
5. Justification (right legal standing)
6. Adoption (membership in God’s family)
7. Sanctification (right conduct of life)
8. Perseverance (remaining a Christian)
9. Death (going to be with the Lord)
10. Glorification (receiving a resurrection body)

We should note here that items 2-6 and part of 7 are all involved in “becoming a Christian.” Numbers 7 and 8 work themselves out in this life, number 9 occurs at the end of this life, and number 10 occurs when Christ returns.

(from Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, p. 670)

[Back to Thessalonians.](#)

v5

In v4 Paul declares that the Thessalonians were loved by God and that they had been chosen by God. Verse 5 offers the basis by which he can make that declaration. And I don’t know about you, but it is something I had not considered before.

Read v5.

Once again the interpreters come at this from more than one direction—but, happily, this time we do not need to choose between them. The truth becomes even more impressive when we *combine* the two interpretations.

the messenger perspective

The first way to interpret this verse is from the perspective of those *bringing* the gospel message—that is, Paul and his companions. They delivered the gospel

- in word
- in power
- in the Holy Spirit
- with full conviction

Obviously the gospel came to the Thessalonians *en logo*, the spoken word—but not mere eloquent and learned discourse. Paul says that that there were supernatural powers behind those words.

power = *dynamei* (doo'-nuh-may)

With the addition of one letter this word would refer to the performance of miracles, but this word “primarily points to the inward power with which the speakers were filled as they gave the message” (Thomas). As the apostle spoke to the Thessalonians he could feel the power of God working in him.

Holy Spirit = *hagios pneuma*

Clearly the aforementioned “power” was generated by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and, as Thomas points out, the third Member of the Godhead “supplie[d] a sense of divine reality to the spoken message.” The old-fashioned word for this is *unction*, which means an anointing.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon: One bright benison [blessing] which private prayer brings down upon the ministry is an indescribable and inimitable something—an unction from the Holy One... If the anointing which we bear come not from the Lord of hosts, we are deceivers, since only in prayer can we obtain it. Let us continue in constant fervent in supplication. Let your fleece lie on the thrashing floor of supplication till it is wet with the dew of heaven.

full/deep conviction, much assurance = *plerophora polle*

Unless I am mistaken, since *plerophora* includes the idea of fullness, this could actually be translated “much full conviction.” This means that the apostle and his fellows experienced perfect assurance as to the truth and effectiveness of their message. And once again, the generating power of this confidence would have been the Holy Spirit.

Now, this is all well and good; Paul and his fellow missionaries could certainly have experienced all of this. But I think it taxes reason to claim this as the means by which “knew” that the Thessalonians had been chosen by God—i.e., were now Christians. I have gleaned some of the descriptions above from Robert Thomas’ commentary (and other commentators share his view), but what he writes at the end left me scratching my head.

Such subjective certainty, sensed by Paul and his associates, served as a major ingredient of this first proof that these readers had been chosen by God.

But common sense tells us that we could stand before someone, presenting the gospel, experiencing *everything* inside us just as described by Paul—and have the gospel message *not* find purchase in the unbeliever to whom we are speaking.

How would what I am feeling tell me what the other person is feeling? Which brings us to the second interpretation.

the recipient perspective

Verses six to ten give evidence for the second perspective; v6 will be sufficient for right now.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6 [NIV best]

Now of course, the Spirit comes into a life from God alone; man has nothing to do with it. But from a strictly imaginative, human perspective, it was as if there occurred a miraculous transference of the Spirit from the

speakers to the listeners in Thessalonica. The missionaries felt it in themselves, and as they spoke the gospel to them, the Spirit took root in the recipients as well. And in the rest of Chapter One Paul itemizes the change in their behavior—the outward sign of their inward conversion.

So if we come at v5 from the recipient perspective, it adds extra color to the event.

for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power

What can be more powerful than the power that converts the soul from death to life. The good news the apostle brought was not some theoretical proposition to be rationally discussed and debated, but a radical, life-changing force. This is why we do not change our life so as to become a Christian; we require the supernatural power of God, through the Spirit, for that life-change to take place. Albert Barnes writes,

There was great power manifested in the gospel in its leading them to break off from their sins, to abandon their idols, and to give their hearts to God. There is no more striking exhibition of his power over mind than in a revival of religion. There is no where more manifest demonstration of his presence than when, in such a revival, the proud are humbled, the profane are awed, the blasphemer is silenced, and the profligate, the abandoned, and the moral are converted unto God, and are led as lost sinners to the same cross, and find the same peace.

and in the Holy Spirit

All of this is orchestrated and conducted by the Holy Spirit. He is the one who, sent by the Father, reaches down into the soul to let loose the power that changes lives.

and with full conviction

It is a given that Paul and his fellows were fully assured, had full conviction of the gospel they preached. But if this speaks of those *receiving* the word, it means that they received it fully, wholeheartedly. Albert Barnes again:

It was not embraced as a doubtful thing, and it did not produce the effect on the mind which is caused by anything that is uncertain in its character. Many seem to embrace the gospel as if they only half believed it, or as if it were a matter of very doubtful truth and importance; but this was not the case with the Thessalonians. There was the firmest conviction of its truth, and they embraced it “heart and soul.” From all that is said in this verse, it is evident that the power of God was remarkably manifested in the conversion of the Thessalonians, and that they embraced the gospel with an uncommonly strong conviction of its truth and value. This fact will account for the subsequent zeal which the apostle so much commends in them.

We will include the end of v5 in our next session, including it with v6, but let’s just touch on it now.

...just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

How did Paul know about this transformation in the hearts of the Thessalonians—how could he write about it, so confidently, in his letter to them? Because it was clearly evidenced in them before he left Thessalonica—because he observed that they observed them, and began taking on some of the behavioral traits of the missionaries. Here was the *external* that gave evidence for the *internal* transformation.

Here is Albert Barnes again:

He means here that he and his fellow-laborers had set them an example, or had shown what Christianity was by their manner of living, and that the Thessalonians had become convinced that the religion which they taught was real. The holy life of a preacher goes far to confirm the truth of the religion which he preaches, and is among the most efficacious means of inducing them to embrace the gospel.

What Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his first letter to them I believe could also describe what occurred in Thessalonica, because it was his standard *modus operandi*.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

I have learned, over the fifty-seven years I have been a Christian, that the life we *show* the unsaved speaks with far greater eloquence than the words we speak. The power of God’s Spirit, active in a life, is the believer’s most effective tool to reveal the actuality of Christ to those who are lost.

SESSION 5: MODELING CHRIST

1 Thessalonians 1:5b-7

PREFACE

We all have heard the phrases, “no man is an island,” and “for whom the bell tolls.” My guess is that few of us know the origin of those phrases. They were written by John Donne in 1624. He was a Christian writer (1572-1631), and during a time of sickness wrote *Devotions upon emergent occasions and seuerall steps in my sickness*. Here is a portion from what he wrote in *Meditation XVII* of that work:

All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated... As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come: so this bell calls us all...

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main... Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

It is impossible to overestimate the breadth and depth of one individual's impact on others—and this is especially true when it comes to kingdom life, for every effect from one person to another is magnified and amplified (as we saw last week) by the power of God.

In our last session we looked at how much the supernatural power of God was at work both in Paul and the missionaries, and in the people of Thessalonica when the gospel was presented to them. It was presented by means of the spoken word, but it came to them—and was received by them—in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction (v5).

Now, from v5b to the end of the chapter, we see how that gospel and its effects were played out in the Thessalonians, and “sounded forth” from Paul and his men, through the Thessalonians, to people far and wide.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5-7.

CHARACTER AND IMITATION

what kind of men we proved to be... (v5)

You also became imitators of us... (v6)

First, a word of caution regarding our interpretation of these two remarks by Paul: Don't lose sight of the fact that in v5 the apostle has explicitly credited all this to the power of God working through the Holy Spirit. Let that same Spirit translate this for us into a *heavenly* perspective.

Paul did not remake himself, by the power of his own will, from a persecutor of Christians to the messenger of Christ to the Christians. It took a blinding, supernatural visitation from the Lord Himself (Acts 9:1-9), followed by several years of meditation, prayer and training (Galatians 1:17-18). Nowhere does Paul take ultimate credit for who and what he has become in and through Christ.

Read Romans 15:15-19.

Note:

v15: because of the **grace that was given me by God**

v16: so that my/the offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, **[how?] sanctified by the Holy Spirit**

v18: I will not presume to speak of anything except **what Christ has accomplished through me [how?]**

v19: **in the power of the Spirit**

You also became imitators of us...

Just so, he would not expect the Thessalonians to learn how to become good little Christians by mimicking his own behavior. The same process that took place in him must occur in them. Read all of v6:

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

We can imitate the behavior of our leaders until we are blue in the face—and it will mean nothing. But by coming to Christ, and letting the Spirit work in and through us, we “become” imitators of them.

5B

I recall an interview I saw a number of years ago with Billy Graham’s music director, Cliff Barrows. I was struck by the level of respect with which he held the evangelist. After the many decades of their close association, traveling together, ministering together, he still referred to him as “Mister Graham”—not “Billy.” And in the interview he went on to explain how resolute Graham was, over the many years of travel away from wives and family, to guard the men’s—and the crusade’s—integrity and reputation. He spoke of how, for example, they never permitted—even for the most innocent reason—women in their hotel rooms. And these were not dictates of a puritanical leader, but righteous standards all the men had heartily embraced as brothers, and ambassadors for Christ. They were determined not to bring shame and dishonor upon the name of their Lord.

I am reminded of this when I read the end of v5:

just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

How could Paul or Billy Graham preach Christ in public, and dishonor Him in private. They could not—they *would* not. How utterly fragile is the faith of those who just moments before had worshiped pagan idols, and how easily that brand new faith would be shattered by the discovery—even the rumor—of being played false by hypocrites. No righteous words coming from their lips could win out over unrighteous behavior in their personal lives. Paul and his men were determined to be a faithful witness in *all* respects of their lives.

v6

And that effort bore fruit. Immediately Paul writes of the positive effect that had on the Thessalonians.

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord,

Sidebar: The KJVs “followers” is not inaccurate, but thin. The Greek *mimetes* (a word from the theatre) means to mimic what one sees someone else doing.

In 1 Corinthians Paul stated explicitly what is only implied here.

Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

Nowhere does Paul claim a life of perfection worthy of being imitated; he just strove to be the earthly, visible example of Christ. In the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Brown). W. Bauder writes,

The example or type is not here a representation of particular qualities, but, first, conduct which is shaped by a definite goal, and, secondly, the experience of persecution and suffering for Christ’s sake—in short, it is a life in fellowship with Christ. To be an imitator of the apostle accordingly means laying hold of Christ in the consciousness of one’s own imperfections and letting one’s life be continually remoulded by Christ in obedience to Him.

And the rest of v6 gives the evidence demonstrating that the Thessalonians did indeed imitate both Paul and Christ.

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

On his way to Thessalonica, during their stay in Philippi, Paul and Silvanus were afforded the opportunity to live out this “tribulation with joy.”

Read Acts 16:23-25.

In their expressions of joy, Paul and Silas [Silvanus] were imitating Christ Jesus, just as they encouraged the Thessalonians to imitate them.

Read Matthew 5:43-45. [Note in v45 what “sons” really means]

And here’s the kicker: the imitation does not stop until it reaches Father God Himself.

Read Matthew 5:48.

Thessalonians (us) → Apostle Paul → Christ Jesus → God the Father

In v5 Paul wrote that the gospel came to the Thessalonians and they received it “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” How could he say this? The first reason he states is that they suffered through “much tribulation” with the joy that only comes by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

tribulation^{nasb}, **affliction**^{kjvs,esv}, **severe suffering**^{niv} = *thlipsis* = from <G2346> (thlibo); **pressure** (literal or figurative) :- afflicted (-tion), anguish, burdened, **persecution**, tribulation, trouble.

We read of such other-worldly joy when Peter along with other apostles were brought before the Council [Sanhedrin] for their incessant preaching. [set up with v33, and Gamaliel’s counsel]

Read Acts 5:40-42.

That is a joy that the world cannot comprehend—a joy that comes only through the Spirit. And it sustained even the brand new converts at Thessalonica. Paul refers to it in Chapter Two.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15.

This is chronicled in Acts 17.

Read Acts 17:4-9.

That is, after they had demanded and received their bribe, they let them go.

There is nothing new under the sun: the same hatred against faith in Christ we see today has been around since before Christ was crucified. He said it would happen—and it has. And this the Thessalonians experienced from the outset. But they were not dissuaded.

v7

Let me put together v6a and v7:

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord (v6a)... so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. (v7)

The word “example” is a bit soft; the NIV comes closer to the idea with “model.”

typon (too’-pohn) = from <G5180> (tupto); **a die (as struck)**, i.e. (by implication) a stamp or scar; by analogy a shape, i.e. a statue, (figurative) style or resemblance; specially a sampler (“**type**”), i.e. a model (for imitation) or instance (for warning) :- en- (ex-) ample, fashion, figure, form, manner, pattern, print; **suggests an exact reproduction.**

Early on these new believers in Thessalonica were modeling Christ to other new Christians in their region of the world. What a marvelous testimony! Would that that would be *our* epitaph:

“He modeled Christ”
“She modeled Christ”
“This church modeled Christ”

SESSION 6: THE REVERBERATING WORD

1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

PREFACE

Because our furniture had not yet been delivered, the first few nights in our new home in Winterset were spent out on the floor of our west porch, a large windowed room facing the distant hills to the west.

On one of those muggy summer nights we didn't get much sleep, but were entertained by a thunderstorm. Now, even though we are both Iowa natives, we had just come from twenty years in southern California, where one does not experience thunderstorms but rarely—and even then they are mere shadowy cartoons of the real thing.

From the panoramic vantage point of our west porch we were witness to a breathtaking display of meteorologic fireworks. The black sky was continually ablaze as lightning danced from cloud to cloud; the noise from these frantic leaps was as constant: an uninterrupted rumbling was the soundtrack to the visual show. Periodically a blinding white spear would be hurled from the clouds to earth with a deafening crash, and then the terrible sound of that impact would reverberate endlessly into the distance.

It felt as if we were standing on the front lines of a relentless battle.

This is what happened in Macedonia and Achaia after Paul left Thessalonica—only the lightning was the Thessalonians, and the resulting thunder was the word of the Lord.

This is how the Lord Himself, through the prophet Isaiah, described the relentless, unstoppable advance of His word.

Read Isaiah 55:10-12.

It wasn't necessary for Paul to tell others what had been accomplished in Thessalonica; because of the reverberating witness of these remarkable new believers, others in the region had told *him*! Let's read our text.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

v8

the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you
word = *logos* (of which Christ Jesus is *the Logos*)

This can mean the word *from* the Lord, or the word *about* the Lord. Both are true regarding the gospel message. From the Thessalonians this message of hope and salvation has “sounded forth.”

sounded forth = *exechetai* = middle from <G1537> (*ek*) and <G2278> (*echeo*); **to “echo” forth, i.e. resound** (be generally reported) :- sound forth.

This word combines the idea of something coming out of something else (*ek* = exit), and the idea of something echoing (*echeo*), i.e., reverberating.

In the Thessalonians the gospel was introduced by the apostle Paul, implanted by the Holy Spirit, and, as v5 suggests, the power of that good news then caused these new converts to eagerly imitate Paul—not just in general righteous behavior, but in ministry: they began to spread the word of the Lord to others just as he had to them.

This “sounding forth”—and, at the end of v8, “going forth”—was not just personal but geographical. The location of Thessalonica as a commercial hub greatly amplified the volume and reach of this message. It would be the difference between one neighbor telling another over the picket fence in little Martensdale, Iowa, and one

commercial pilot telling another commercial pilot at O'hare International Airport in Chicago, or one diplomat telling another at the United Nations in New York. The word of the Lord "sounded forth" quickly, exponentially throughout the Macedonian/Achaian region.

Sidebar: We should never underestimate the power of God to spread His message far and wide from a small beginning. For example:

- In the early 1980s I pitched a simple monologue for Peter to my pastor at the time. He took the idea and suggested I write one for all twelve disciples. Because of that one man's encouragement—and because God (not Al Gore) invented the Internet—to-date my plays have been performed all over the world, downloaded some 400,000 times.
- Also in the eighties I pitched the idea to my friend the music minister, to write brief devotionals he could use every week at the close of his choir rehearsals, and he liked the idea. So because of that small beginning, and one man's encouragement—and that same God-invention—for the last twenty-five years my devotional writings and Bible Studies have been read all over the world, read or downloaded almost a three-quarters of a million times.

Now understand: none of this is about me; it is about the genius and power of God to spread His message through small, seemingly insignificant individuals. He gifts one person, gifts another, then brings them together at the right moment, and, by His grace, a small idea becomes something that grows and matures and spreads far and wide—just as it did in Macedonia and Achaia because of Paul presenting the gospel to the Thessalonians.

This should encourage us all—especially those working with kids in Awana, teaching them in Sunday School; grandparents speaking with their grandchildren, and teaching them by their lives. As we share the gospel—even with just our observed behavior and decisions—we must remember that small and seemingly insignificant decisions we make can help change the world for Christ.

But remember v7: the Thessalonians did not just speak to people; they were "an example" to people. We say more with our lives, our behavior, than we do with our words.

but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth

This is a difficult phrase to interpret, as evidenced by the different translations. The NKJV, NIV and ESV are translated in such a way to suggest Paul is employing some harmless hyperbole.

NKJV: ...but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out,

NIV: ...your faith in God has become known everywhere.

ESV: ...but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere,

Clearly the gospel had not reached "everywhere," or "every place," since it hasn't yet even today. And it certainly had not reached literally "everywhere" because of the Thessalonians. It makes more sense to translate this as the KJV and NASB do:

KJV: ...but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad;

NASB: ...but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth,

This tracks better. Here Paul is saying that *wherever people have heard of you, Thessalonians, the word of the Lord has sounded forth*. That is, their reputation as sincere, effective believers in Christ had spread far and wide—and over a relatively short period of time.

...so that we have no need to say anything.

Imagine Paul leaving Thessalonica and arriving in Berea. He opens his mouth to say something like, "Let me tell you about the Thessalonians," only to have the Bereans say first, "Hey, have you heard about what happened in Thessalonica?" The word had gotten out even before he left the city!

v9

And that's how he begins v9:

For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you...

The word had already gone out that the Thessalonians had turned from their former ways to *The Way*. And here is evidence that most of the converts in Thessalonica were Gentile:

and how you turned to God from idols

As Robert L. Thomas points out, "Idol worship did not dominate the Jews after the Babylonian exile." As you might recall, perhaps the largest subset of converts were God-fearing Greeks—but they could very well have retained some of their idol worship even while worshiping Yahweh.

Here is the picture of true repentance—a turning *away from* the direction they were previously headed ("from idols"), followed by a turning *toward* a new direction ("to God"). Here, in vv9-10, Paul presents two aspects of this new direction:

- to **serve** a living and true God, and
- to **wait** for His Son from heaven

Here is the universal job description for *every* believer: to serve and wait.

serve = *diakonein* = from <G1401> (doulos); **to be a slave to** (literal or figurative, involuntary or voluntary) :- **be in bondage**, (do) serve (-ice).

Once again, what is remarkable here is that Paul does not say what you might expect—what he will say to other young churches—something along the line of, *You now belong to Christ, so you **should be** serving and waiting...* But to the Thessalonians he affirms them for *already* having turned away from idols to serve and wait... Who are they slaves to now? "a/the living and true God"

This God is not dead and ineffective, like their previous idols, but *zao*—alive; unlike those lifeless statues of fictional gods, their God is full of life: He *has* life and He *gives* life; He is the Creator of all that is, and gives life to all. **Sidebar:** Because the definite article is not in the text, the NASB plays it safe with "a living," but includes "or the" in the margin notes. All the other translations cut right to the implied "the"—i.e., the *only* God.

He is also—in case you haven't caught the implication, *Thessalonians*—the only true, genuine God. All other gods are counterfeit representations of Him, pretenders. The God whose Son is Jesus the Christ is the only true God.

v10

Every believer is to serve, and, in v10, every believer is to wait.

wait = *anamenain* = to await; **to keep on waiting for**;

This word includes more than just idly waiting around for something to happen. It includes the idea of expectancy, of enduring with anticipatory hope.

Read Job 2:9. [not KJV or NIV]

The word in the original Hebrew translated "hold fast" (*hazaq*) in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the OT) is translated by the same Greek word in our text, translated "wait." And who are they waiting for?

His Son from heaven/the heavens [lit.]

Here Paul tees up a theme he will revisit in both letters: the return of Christ.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:14-15.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2.

And finally, Paul adds to the first two descriptions of Jesus—that He is “from heaven” and “raised from the dead”—a third description: Jesus “rescues us from the wrath to come.” In pretty fair detail we looked at this coming “wrath” at the end of our previous study on Christ in the Old Testament. The technical use of the word *orge* refers to the seven-year period of “tribulation” that follows the triumphant return of Christ Jesus to remove His church before the wrath commences.

Interesting word translated “rescues” or “delivers”; it offers us an eloquent word-picture of this climactic event.

rescues, delivers = *rhyomai* (rhoo'-ah-mai) = akin to (rheo) (**through the idea of a current; to rush or draw (for oneself),**
i.e. rescue, deliver

Just before the commencement of this horrible, seven-year time of wrath against God’s enemies—an event no one would wish to witness—Jesus will reveal Himself in the clouds [*without touching down on earth*] and sweep all His children to safety, and, as if drawn into a life-giving river, they will follow Him back to heaven. Here is how Paul speaks of it in Chapter 5:

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:8-11.

SESSION 7: NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

1 Thessalonians 2:1-4

PREFACE

The higher-numbered channels on our local over-the-air television options recently made some changes to their programming. Now one (or two; it's hard to tell) stations seem to be taken over by one program: a marathon of "religious" folk begging for money non-stop. ("Just send in \$1,000 for a blessing.") My response to this consists of just two words: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

Such behavior *in* the name of Christ brings only shame *upon* the name of Christ. Paul describes them accurately in Romans 16:18:

For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

Remember the story in Acts 16 about the slave girl with a spirit of divination who was bringing her masters great profit by her fortunetelling. She cried out behind Paul and his men, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation."

Hey, that's a good thing, right? No, Paul wanted no association with such a charlatan—even if she *was* telling the truth in their case. He immediately turned and commanded the spirit to leave her. When it did, this was displeasing to her masters, who suddenly saw their money bags getting lighter, and they had Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, and thrown into jail.

In the Thessalonian letters—and especially in Chapter Two of the first letter, which is before us now—Paul spends no small quantity of ink defending his behavior and his motives in bringing the gospel to Thessalonica. Although the evidence is not explicitly stated for who it was spreading lies about him, Paul clearly feels the need to defend himself. So let's dig into this second chapter of his letter. Let's read our passage.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-4.

v1

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain,

The word "coming (to you)" literally means "entrance"—that is, Paul is not just referring to the Thessalonians being just one more tic mark on an itinerary, but that he and his men entered into their lives.

Even as a young boy I understood the difference between a visiting evangelist and a pastor. The first showed up and, often with distinctive charisma, preached powerfully for one or a few nights, then was gone. The pastor, in contrast, typically had less charisma, was less flashy, but he slogged it out over the long haul. The difference was that the pastor *remained*—He dwelt *with* the people, ministering to the smaller day-to-day aspects of church life, not just the number of people who walked the aisle at the end of a message.

Paul was both: he was a traveling evangelist who, as we have and will continue to see, also invested his life in the church, and was with them—if only by long-distance—over the long haul. He was an eloquent blend of evangelist and pastor.

Their coming was "not in vain." The word translated "vain" in most versions is

vain, failure^{niv} = *kene* = apparently a primary word; **empty** (literal or figurative) :- empty, (in) vain.

The NIV's "failure" would be appropriate if Paul had used the Greek *mataios* (fruitless, ineffective), instead of *kene*. These are not synonymous, but one leads to the other: if one's preaching is empty (*kene*), it will result in ministry failure (*mataios*). For Paul, neither was true; remember how he described the message of his preaching in Chapter One:

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5.

That was certainly not “empty,” nor did it result in “failure”:

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7.

Vincent's *Word Studies* points out that “the Greek for ‘was,’ [was not in vain] expresses rather ‘has been and is,’ implying the permanent and continuing character of his preaching.” Paul was no flash-in-the-pan itinerant evangelist: his message, along with his love for the church was deep, wide, and enduring.

v2

Read v2.

after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi

already suffered = undergo hardship previously

mistreated = *hybrizo* (hoo-brid'-zo) = from <G5196> (hubris); **to exercise violence, i.e. abuse** :- use despitely, reproach, entreat shamefully (spitefully); YLT: “*injuriously treated*”.

Remember, not only was their treatment shameful from a Christian perspective, it was shameful from a *civic* perspective.

Read Acts 16:37.

Then it continued in Thessalonica.

amid much opposition

Read Acts 17:4-5.

opposition^{nasb, niv}, **conflict**^{nkjv, esv}, **contention**^{kjv} = *agoni* (ah-go'-nai) = from <G71> (ago); properly a place of assembly (as if led), i.e. (by implication) a contest (held there); figurative an effort or anxiety :- conflict, contention, fight, race; “*pictures an athlete's struggle to gain first place in a race or contest*” (Thomas).

This opposition was so vehement that what was ignited in Thessalonica was later exported to their next stop, Berea.

Read Acts 17:13.

But even amidst this opposition, both in Philippi and in Thessalonica, Paul “was bold.” Note how he puts it: “we had the boldness **in our God** to speak...”

boldness = *parresiazomai* = middle from <G3954> (parrhesia); **to be frank in utterance, or confident in spirit and demeanor** :- be (wax) bold, (preach, speak) boldly.

And note the circular aspect of this: Vincent points out that in the original text “there is a slight emphasis on *our* God; their boldness was not mere natural courage, but was inspired by God.” [The NIV captures it with, “*with the help of our God*.”] Paul had absolute trust in God to empower him for ministry even in the face of such opposition; in turn, God *supplied the power*, the boldness needed. God rewards faith with whatever is necessary for us to endure. Perhaps this was what James was thinking of when he opened his epistle.

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

We place our trust in Him, and in turn He gives us what we need to turn that faith into action—for Him. As a result, His faithfulness toward us renews and strengthens *our* faith. And on and on...

v3

In this portion of his letter—our second chapter, and especially vv3-8—Paul establishes a rhythm, a structure for his *apologia*. He first states what is *not* true, then answers it with what *is* true.

Verses 3-4

We are *not* guilty of
 error
 impurity
 deceit
 trying to please men
 But we
 have been called by God for this task
 seek to please not men but God, who alone knows our hearts

Verses 5-8

We did *not*
 use flattering (i.e., man-pleasing) speech
 have a pretext for greed
 seek glory from men
 But we
 were as gentle among you as a nursing mother is with her child
 have a true affection for you; you are dear to us
 to the extent that we gave you not just the good news of Christ,
 but our very lives

Read v3.

error

error = *planes* (plah'-nays) = feminine of <G4108> (planos) (as abstract); [when active:] **object: fraudulence; subject: a straying from orthodoxy or piety** :- deceit, to deceive, delusion, error; **here, passive, refers more to self-delusion.**

If this had been in the active voice it would have been translated “deceit,” meaning Paul was not guilty of purposely leading the Thessalonians astray with false teaching. Since it is in the passive voice, Paul is saying that he was not guilty of being ignorant of the truth—of being led astray himself—hence, “error.” More than once Paul wrote the churches what he wrote to the Galatians in the familiar verse:

Read Galatians 6:7.

When we are unfamiliar with God’s word, we can easily be led astray by false teachers. Paul is telling them I came to you with truth, not error; I had not been fooled by someone else.

impurity

impurity^{nasb, esv}, **uncleanness**^{kjvs}, **impure motives**^{niv} = *akartharsias* = to be unclean physically or morally.

Nothing is new under the sun. What Eli’s sons were guilty of in the early days of Samuel, when they “lay with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting” (1 Samuel 2:22)—sexual immorality under the guise of piety—is still prevalent today, as well as the first century. Paul tells them that they brought none of that with them.

deceit

deceit^{nasb, nkjv}, **guile**^{kjv}, **(attempt to) deceive**^{esv}, **(trying to) trick you**^{niv} = *dolo* = from an obsolete primary dello (**probably meaning to decoy**; compare <G1185> (deleazo)); a trick (bait), i.e. (figurative) wile :- craft, subtily.

v4

V4 in the NASB—especially the updated version—is a classic example of something translated a little bit *too* literal—to the point of stilted, awkward structure. **Read v4.** It may be accurate, but it requires a few times through to understand it. Here is *The Message* paraphrase:

Be assured that when we speak to you we're not after crowd approval—only God approval. Since we've been put through that battery of tests, you are guaranteed that both we and the Message are free of error, mixed motives, or hidden agendas.

(1 Thessalonians 2:4 *The Message*)

Matthew Henry: Their design was to please God and not men. God is a God of truth, and requires truth in the inward parts; and, if sincerity be wanting, all that we do cannot please God. The gospel of Christ is not accommodated to the fain fancies and lusts of men, to gratify their appetites and passions; but, on the contrary, it was designed for the mortifying of their corrupt affections, and delivering them from the power of fancy, that they might be brought under the power of faith.

SESSION 8: CLOAKS AND FALSE COLORS

1 Thessalonians 2:5-8

PREFACE

I spent no small amount of time earlier this week trying to come up with a familiar illustration with which to preface this study. But after a while I realized that this was not necessary—for two reasons:

1. What Paul writes, and how he writes it, is so clear and so easily understood that it requires no contemporary illustration;
2. What Paul writes is so common, so rampant [*"spreading unchecked"*] in our own society, that upon reading this passage every one of us can supply for ourselves a number of ready examples from life.

So instead of wasting time telling a story, let's get right to it.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8.

In this passage we have the second part of the outline from last week, where Paul first presents what they *didn't* do, then explains what they *did* do.

Verses 5-8

We did *not*
 use flattering (i.e., man-pleasing) speech
 have a pretext for greed
 seek glory from men
But we
 were as gentle among you as a nursing mother is with her child
 have a true affection for you; you are dear to us
 to the extent that we gave you not just the good news of Christ,
 but our very lives

Let me point out another theme woven into this text. Look at v4:

we speak, not as pleasing men, but God

From v5:

we never came with flattering speech...

And from v6:

nor did we seek glory from men

Here, tucked inside Paul's explanation of what they *didn't* do, we discover a dark and insidious cause and effect: From one perspective it might seem—if not laudable, at least not so terrible—that we seek to please others. After all (we tell ourselves), that's just being generous and thoughtful; putting their needs before our own. But when our effort is to please men, it is from men we "seek glory." And when that glory is not forthcoming, our spirit turns bitter and resentful.

Jesus spoke of this in his sermon on the mount.

Read Matthew 6:16-18.

It was C. S. Lewis who put it succinctly: "Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in; aim at earth and you will get neither."

vv5-6

For we never came with flattering speech [lit., in a word (logoi) of flattery], as you know,

The word translated “flattering” is found nowhere else in the NT, but is fairly common in ancient secular literature.

flattering = *kolakeia* = from a derivative of *kolax* (a fawner); flattery :- x flattering.

The term *kolakeia* frequently appears in catalogs of vices, such as Philo, who lists “flattery” alongside trickery, deceitfulness, and false speaking. The word is not as innocent as just telling your wife her hair looks nice today; it includes the ideas of ulterior motives, insincerity, deceit.

nor with a pretext for greed

The NIV’s “nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed” could be interpreted, we really were greedy, and didn’t try to hide it”—which of course is not what Paul is saying. The idea is that they never came with “a pretext such as covetousness would use” (Ellicott, Milligan).

Both of these—flattery and a pretext for greed—speak of someone being two-faced, deceitful. Paul did not come to Thessalonica to tickle their ears with sweet talk, distracting them while he picked their pockets.

God is witness

And for his defense he calls to the witness stand God Himself. Note that for testimony to his *conduct*, he appeals to the Thessalonians themselves (“as you know”); for testimony to his *motives*, he appeals to God (Vincent). Only God could testify to the contents of his heart.

nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others,

Jesus spoke of this to the Jewish leaders.

Read John 5:41-44. [not NIV]

“I do not receive glory from men”

This can be read a number of ways:

- men do not give me honor (they gave, instead, abuse and scorn)
- the questionable NIV translation: I do not *accept* the praise of men
- I do not *seek* the honor of men
- I do not *need* the honor of men
- best: I do not receive *my* glory from men, but from God. That is, *Why should I bother with the pitiful glory man can give me? I'll wait for the real thing from my Father.*

Back to Thessalonians

Paul is saying much the same thing in v6: they were not seeking the glory of men, because it means nothing compared to the crown awaiting them from the heavenly Father.

even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.

By right of their office as apostles—official ambassadors sent by Christ—they could have demanded, or at least permitted, the Thessalonians to treat them with honor, deference. But this they did not do.

vv7-8

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8.

But we proved to be gentle among you...

Literally, “we **became** gentle **in your midst**”—which is indicative of Paul’s *modus operandi*, as he describes it to the Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-23.

Paul, following the model of Christ, was willing to forgo his personal rights and privileges—even, if necessary, his native personality—for the sake of those to whom he was ministering. This was not duplicity, or a self-serving performance, but a sacrificial act that put the good of others before his own.

Contrast what he says in v7 with the darker form of this, mentioned in vv5-6. Using “flattering speech” so as to gain “glory from men” is *self-serving*, whereas becoming something one typically is not, stepping outside one’s normal comfort zone so as to win souls with the gospel, is serving *others*—and, ultimately, serving God.

as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.

I love the imagery of the word translated “tenderly cares.” The NIV and ESV are too thin; *thalpo* is an old word meaning to keep warm, to cherish with tender love, to foster.

tenderly cares, cherishes, caring for, taking care of^{esv} = *thalpo* = probably akin to *thallo* (**to warm**); **to brood**, i.e. (figurative) to foster :- cherish.

It is the picture of a brooding hen carefully covering her eggs with her own body to keep them warm and safe. Maybe she would like to get up and stretch her legs, go out for some fresh air. But she remains there, giving of herself for the sake of her young.

Having so fond an affection for you...

ESV: being affectionately desirous of you...

Paul expands the imagery of the tender care of a nursing mother by using a rare Greek word [*homeiromai*] to describe how deep and visceral is his affection for the Thessalonians. Found only here in the NT, we can look to the book of Job for a better understanding of the intensity of Paul’s affection. The Septuagint uses this word to translate the Hebrew *haka* [*hai-kaw*]—in Job 3:21, “long for.”

Read Job 3:20-22.

Though speaking of death, rather than brothers and sisters in Christ, this opens a window onto the full depth of Paul’s affection for the Thessalonians. *Haka* probably comes from a word that includes the idea of piercing, so getting from that to “longing” I take to mean that it is an intensified longing that one feels in the gut.

we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives

Paul closes this thought, in the rest of v8, by describing their—the missionaries’—expression of this affection. What did they do with it? They were “well-pleased [*they found pleasure in*] impart[ing] to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives.”

They did not just preach the gospel then move onto their next stop. Even after they had left Thessalonica, they gave over to these dear people their very “lives.”

lives, souls^{kjv}, **selves**^{esv} = *psyche* (soo-khay’) = from <G5594> (psucho); **breath, i.e. (by implication) spirit**, abstract or concrete (the animal sentient principle only; thus distinguished on the one hand from <G4151> (pneuma), which is the rational and immortal soul; and on the other from <G2222> (zoe), which is mere vitality, even of plants: these terms thus exactly correspond respectively to the Hebrew <H5315> (nephesh), <H7307> (ruwach) and <H2416> (chay)) :- heart (+ -ily), life, mind, soul, + us, + you. **More than just their physical lives; in the depths of their being they cared.**

Why? Because they had become so dear to them—they were *loved*.

What a difference this makes!

Believe me when I tell you that over the course of my lifetime I have met and even worked with plenty of pastors on the flip-side of this coin—men who had no affection for, felt no bond with the people to whom they were to be ministering. Delivering a well-researched, eloquent sermon on Sunday morning does not a pastor make. Oh, there were some who, like Paul, loved the flock; but there have been far too many that did not.

So emerging from our wilderness years and coming to the church where we are presently, we recognized immediately that here was a body of believers who were loved by their pastor. It was soon apparent that their pastor *loved* this flock—a *psyche*-love, a soul-love. He was (and *is*) loved in return, and this foundation means that the sheep in this fold love each other. (And, of course, this pastoral love and affection has continued on in those who followed.) In such a setting, it is much easier for the gospel message to find purchase in the hearts of those who hear it—just as it did in Thessalonica.

SESSION 9: BE WHO YOU REALLY ARE

1 Thessalonians 2:9-12

PREFACE

How far are we willing to go to spread the gospel, whether in active missionary service, or by simply, through our daily behavior, revealing Christ to the unsaved?

The British have a delightfully colorful term for how far the apostle Paul was willing to go during his missionary journeys: to “muck in”—as opposed to “tuck in,” which means to eat food heartily. The Oxford Dictionary defines to “muck in” as “sharing tasks or accommodation without expecting a privileged position.” The term means not being afraid to get your hands dirty (mucky), even if your station or rank might rightly absolve you.

Last week we discussed the subtle difference between using flattery for self-glorification, and becoming something one typically is not, stepping outside one’s normal comfort zone, so as to win souls with the gospel. Here we have a similarly subtle contrast between the right of a missionary or evangelist or preacher/pastor to be supported by those to whom he ministers, and the righteous position of Paul to *refuse* such assistance from the Thessalonians, as well as a number of other churches where he taught (e.g., Corinth).

Let’s begin in the Pentateuch for the basis of this right.

Read Deuteronomy 25:4.

In those days, grain would be broken away from its husk by having an ox walk on it repeatedly (usually around a circle). It would be cruel to force the ox to walk on all the grain, yet to keep him muzzled so he couldn’t eat any of it.

Paul used this commonsense law for the basis of his position to Timothy and the Corinthians that ministers of the gospel are worthy of (financial) support. To the Corinthians he expounds at length [1 Corinthians 9:3-12], but let’s read the more succinct version he wrote to Timothy.

Read 1 Timothy 5:17-18.

The second quotation used by Paul is from the lips of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, as He gave instructions to the seventy-two disciples he was sending out.

Read Luke 10:5-7.

With that established—the biblical basis for supporting a, shall we say, full-time minister—let’s look at our text, beginning at v8.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:8-12.**v9**

The beginning of v9 connects back to v8, where Paul writes, “**we were well-pleased to impart to you** not only the gospel of God but also **our own lives**.”

For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship,

labor = *kop’ōn* = from <G2875> (kopto); a cut, i.e. (by analogy) **toil (as reducing the strength)**, literal or figurative; by implication pains :- labour, + trouble, weariness; **the normal weariness that comes as the result of hard work**.

hardship^{nasb,nlv}, **toil**^{nkjv,esv}, **travail**^{kjv} = *moch’thon* = from the base of <G3425> (mogis); toil, i.e. (by implication) sadness :- painfulness, travail; **external difficulties encountered in the process (e.g., obstruction, persecution)**

We can only make an educated guess at the labor to which Paul refers, but it was probably one form or another of his trade: tentmaking. Every Jewish child had to learn a trade, and this was Paul's.

how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you,

Sidebar: In our vernacular, “working night and day” is interpreted as working round-the-clock. But in Paul's time, the Thessalonians would read this as “any part of the night and any part of the day”—that is, he is probably saying that they were up before dawn and worked till after sundown. The point is that he spared himself no toil so as to avoid placing a burden on the people of Thessalonica.

Why did Paul do this in Thessalonica? Why did he purposely take a job to support his ministry, rather than let those to whom he ministered support him? Here are some possibilities:

- The local church could not afford to support the missionaries.
- Seeing that they might be sensitive to this, Paul wanted nothing to distract from the pure message of the gospel, or to dilute it, by asking for financial help in return (*maybe they had been ripped off by someone*).
- There is evidence that some in the community were lazy, and unwilling to pull their own weight, so Paul saw the need to give them a real-life object lesson. We see this evidence near the end of the second letter.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10.

This last would seem to be the most apparent reason Paul did this when he was with them—but what is confusing is that v11 makes it sound as if he just heard about this *after* he left.

Read v11.

If this had been known before he arrived in Thessalonica (thus influencing his decision to work for his keep), one would expect him to write here, “For we hear that some among you are *still* leading an undisciplined life...”

Whatever the reason, Paul thought it was important—to the extent that when his own wages were insufficient, he accepted help from the church in nearby Philippi, rather than seek or accept support from the Thessalonians themselves.

Read Philippians 4:15-16.

Churches, like individuals, have their special gifts. For the Thessalonica church it was actively, energetically spreading the gospel; for the Philippi church it was sending monetary support to the mission field.

v10

There is a sense in which the apostle Paul had it easier than we today. We now live in a world in which there is no line of demarcation between local and universal. It still may be possible—maybe—that in the confines of one's own home we can behave badly and no one will know, but beyond those four walls there is no expectation of privacy, or that what only a few have witnessed will remain only locally known. Today bad behavior witnessed by even just one person can instantly be broadcast to millions on *YouTube*.

Whether a missionary out in the field of a foreign land, or just someone witnessing to fellow workers during the week, our behavior is constantly being observed—and perhaps recorded and shared. With that being true, in vv10-12 the apostle offers himself and his fellow missionaries as an example for how to conduct one's life—and the reason why—both public and private.

In v5 Paul called upon God as a witness to help prove to the Thessalonians that he did not come to them with a pretext for greed. In v10 he reminds them that God can witness to his righteous behavior in moments not witnessed by them—that is, in private.

Read v10.

The word translated “behaved” is the same Greek word that is translated “proved to be” (or “were”) in v7: *ginomai*, and could be translated, as noted in our discussion of v7, “became.”

In v10 Paul writes that they behaved

devoutly = *hosios* = piously, holily (religious piety)

uprightly = *dikaios* = righteously, justly, equitably (moral conduct)

blamelessly = *amemptos* = faultlessly, unblamably (untainted by fault)

I don’t know about you, but to me that’s a convicting list. A part of me wants to ask, “Is that even possible?” These guys sound like supermen—or braggarts. He doesn’t say it here, but in 2 Corinthians Paul explains why this is not bragging.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:12.

It was by God’s grace that they could conduct themselves this way. David Guzik writes,

Paul didn’t have to say, “Please don’t look at my life. Look to Jesus.” Paul wanted people to look to Jesus, but he could also tell them to look at his life, because the power of Jesus was real in his life.

In Thessalonica Paul and his men were living out what he wrote to the Galatians in the fifth chapter of his letter to them. In part,

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

and

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. (Galatians 5:13,16-17)

Perhaps there were behaviors that Paul—if he had been giving free rein to the flesh—would have rather been doing. But he loved the Thessalonians, and was there to serve them, not himself. So he was determined to walk by the Spirit, rather than the flesh.

v11

Earlier Paul had used the metaphor of a nursing mother to describe their tenderness in dealing with the church. Now he changes the metaphor from mother to father to describe how they encouraged the Thessalonians to improve their walk with Christ.

Read v11.

Sidebar: The NIV and ESV translations re-order the text and locate the verse breaks different from the other translations, but say the same thing.

A good father would mix comforting encouragement with more authoritative direction and discipline when dealing with his children. So the father metaphor is appropriate when he lists how they were

exhorting = *parakalountes* = admonishing

encouraging = *paramythoumenoi* = to relate near, to comfort

imploring = *martyromenoi* = testify, urge, “appeal to by something sacred”

Paul’s use of a form of this word (modified by “dia”) in his second letter to Timothy helps us understand what he is saying to the Thessalonians.

Read 2 Timothy 4:1-2. (I solemnly “charge” you...)

v12

Verse 12 gives us the all-important *reason* why Paul and his men were doing all this—why they had been so careful with their own behavior, and exhorting the church regarding their behavior.

Read v12.

walk, live lives^{niv} = *peripatein* = from <G4012> (peri) and <G3961> (pateo); **to tread all around, i.e. walk at large** (especially as proof of ability); figurative to live, **deport oneself**, follow (as a companion or votary) :- go, be occupied with, walk (about).

I agree with those commentators who suggest that the word translated “worthy” should be “worthily.” That is, Paul is not saying we should behave properly so as to *qualify* for God’s kingdom, but that our lives (walk) should reflect the kingdom of which we are already a part.

worthy, worthily = *axios* = adverb from <G514> (axios); **appropriately** :- **as becometh**, after a godly sort, worthily (-thy).

Most of the unsaved in this world are introduced to Christ by the *behavior* of believers. That is their first clue that there is something—some *One*—out there better than what they know. Our behavior—our witness—can either attract or repel; we can attract them toward His kingdom and glory, or send them running away from His kingdom and glory.

It is up to us to walk by the Spirit, rather than the flesh.

SESSION 10: THE WORKING WORD

1 Thessalonians 2:13

PREFACE

The Christian life is a challenging occupation—and not just because our faith is at odds with the world's system. Even *within* the faith we need to keep our heads about us, using discernment, weighing the validity of what we read and hear. We need to understand what our Bible says, what it does *not* say, and how it says it.

The two verses that follow Jesus' lengthy Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, record the immediate response of the crowd.

Read Matthew 7:28-29.

The scribes were smart, scholarly, well-spoken—and immersed in human tradition. But “Jesus, the anointed One, not only received His words from the mouth of God, like Moses and the prophets, but spoke with the unique authority of the Son who alone knows the Father and who alone can reveal Him” (O. Betz in *Brown*) And the people hearing Him speak, could immediately tell the difference. This “authority” the people recognized but could not accurately explain, was *the Word of God speaking the words of God*—or, more succinctly, **God speaking**.

Because the Greek is the familiar *logos*, the other translations emphasize the oral aspects of the Sermon: “these sayings,” “saying these things.” I think we tend to underestimate the importance of the *spoken* word in God's economy. After all, how did God create the universe in the first place? He *spoke* it into existence.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)

And throughout the historical epochs recorded in our Bible, God's word was transmitted orally, verbally, through teachers, preachers and prophets.

THE WORD

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

the word of God

Let's begin with what we know and have. I've always referred to this as my “junior high” Bible, but it records on the first page that it was given to me by my parents for Christmas 1961, when I was ten years old and still in the sixth grade (last year of grade school), but some of the names recorded in it I only knew in high school. So this was my first personal Bible, and it was with me throughout the tumultuous years of my youth.

It still bears the scars of being tossed into the rear saddle baskets on my bike, and most of us understand that, physically, this is just a book. It is not a holy relic to be kept under glass. It does not glow in the dark, nor do our hands tingle when we pick it up. Rather, it is to be used, to be read, to be studied and written in. When one wears out, we can easily replace it at the nearest Bible bookstore. Most of us have multiple copies of this book, including different versions. Some of us now use it in a form that is not bound, but read from a glowing plastic screen. As such it is just another piece of software—a series of zeros and ones stored in an electronic device.

Even so, the *words* it contains *are* holy. When we hear the phrase, “the word of God,” our first thought is of this book, because it contains the literal words of God, transmitted through men by the Holy Spirit. (Our second thought is of the incarnate Word, as the apostle John referred to Jesus.)

So this book—even this battered and scarred copy from my youth—is the literal word of God. But this is not the “word” mentioned in our text—although it contains some of the same words.

the word of God which you heard from us

At the time of Paul's missionary journeys, God's *written* word consisted only of what we would call the Old Testament—both in Hebrew and Greek (Septuagint)—and almost certainly not in one cohesive volume. This was still the time of scrolls; the complete OT would not be “bound” into one volume until the invention of the codex [earliest form of “book” as we know it] in the second century, and lugging around a duffel bag full of individual scrolls comprising the Jewish Scriptures would certainly not have been conducive to Paul's mobile lifestyle.

Paul writes “the word of God which you heard from us”—literally, “the word of hearing” (*logon akoe s*). What Paul is saying—literally, because this, as most of his letters, were dictated to an amanuensis—is that when he and his fellows were standing in front of the Thessalonians, they were speaking to them *ex cathedra*—literally, “from the chair,” but means speaking accurately, infallibly for God. They were not *reading* the word of God to them, as they would today, but were *speaking* the word of God.

you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God,

Paul was grateful to God that the message he delivered to the Thessalonians was not just politely listened to, but believed as truth. In this verse he employs two different words that could, generally, mean the same thing: to receive.

we...thank God that when you received [paralambano] the word of God...you accepted [dechomai] it...as the word of God

I like how the venerable W. E. Vine explains the difference: “The former refers to the ear; the latter, adding the idea of appropriation, to the heart.” But listen to the exuberance of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, from his sermon on this text, delivered on March 24, 1887:

The Word is twice mentioned in our version. “When you received the Word of God which you heard of us, you received it.” In the Greek those are two different words altogether. The second, “received,” might, perhaps, better be read, “accepted.” I do not think that I should be straining a point if I read it, “You welcomed it.” They first received it by eagerly hearing it. They wanted to know what it was all about. They were attentive to it and wanted to understand it. When they had heard it, they rejoiced, and said, “Oh, yes, yes, yes, this is the very thing we need!” They embraced it. That word will do—they embraced it! They put their arms around it and would not let it go. They were hospitable to the Gospel and said, “Come in, you blessed of the Lord. Come and live in our hearts!”

Spurgeon continues:

They assented and they consented to the Word of the Lord. They first appreciated the Gospel and then they apprehended it by faith. They were like the man that was hungry in a foreign land and he could not make the people quite understand. But as soon as they brought an article of food which he liked he fell to, directly, and made them comprehend that he would be glad for more of that sort of thing. By his hearty reception of what they brought, the hungry man said plainly, “Bring some more of that.” So we have a people about us, thank God, that are looking out for the Gospel! They are always willing to hear it if men will but preach it! And when they do get it, they mean business and feed upon the Word with hearty appetite. How glad I am to feed men that will eat! It is a pleasure, indeed. The spiritually hungry welcome heavenly food—they take it into themselves and receive it as the bread their soul craves! Oh, what a mercy it is when sermons are preached which feed souls and souls hear so as to feed thereon! It is a happy day when a full Christ and empty sinners meet!

How the Thessalonians received the word delivered by Paul is parallel to how some do or do not receive Christ Himself—in fact, that was the result in Thessalonica. Many people hear the words of the gospel; their physical ears hear the sound of the message. For some that's where it ends: just words that bounce off. But some physically hear the words of the gospel, and they *receive into themselves* (appropriate), in their heart, the truth of the message. And Christ Jesus finds a home in their heart.

Just like that crowd that listened so intently at the feet of Jesus, the people in Thessalonica recognized that these were the words of very God. And they took them to heart; these holy words found purchase in their lives—their behavior later gave clear and dramatic witness to their new faith.

THE WORK

Let's set up the second part of our study with what God, through the prophet Jeremiah, had to say about His word.

Read Jeremiah 23:28-29.

Just as we may forget the importance of the spoken word in God's economy, we can also forget the supernatural power of that word. Whether in spoken or written form, God says that His word—the words of God—contains the consuming, cleansing force of fire [interestingly, the Hebrew word here for fire is *esh* (aysh), which sounds very much like "ash."] and the concussive, crushing force of an industrial sledge that can shatter rock with one blow. *Just His word!* Which follows, of course: If God can speak the world into existence, He can easily speak the destruction of any or all of its component parts.

which also performs its work in you who believe.

But v13 does not speak of the destructive force of His word, but the creative, sustaining, reparative force. This includes a caveat; there is a condition: One must believe; the Holy Spirit must be in residence for God's word to be effectual in a life.

performs its work^{nasb}, **effectively works**^{nkjv}, **at work**^{niv, esv} = *energeitai* = from <G1756> (energes); **to be active, efficient**
:- do, **(be) effectual** (fervent), be mighty in, shew forth self, work (effectually in).

This word, in its active voice, always describes supernatural activity, principally God's (Thomas). In noun form it means *power in exercise*, and is used only of superhuman power (Vincent). So the emphasis here is on the kind of work that is beyond our ken, beyond our understanding.

It is impossible to exhaustively list the ways the word works in believer's lives, but Joseph S. Exell speaks of the essentials:

Joseph S. Exell: The Gospel is efficacious in transforming character. As the planet receiving the light of the sun is transformed into an imitation sun, so the believing soul, receiving the light of the Word, is changed into the image of that Word. Whatever the Divine Word prescribes, that it works in us. Does it prescribe repentance?—it works repentance; faith?—it works faith; obedience?—it works obedience; knowledge?—it enlightens to know. Its transforming power is continually demonstrated. It makes the niggardly generous, the profane holy, the drunkard sober, the profligate chaste. Faith is the vital force that connects the soul with this converting power.

Oh, that we would more regularly acknowledge and tap into this power that is in us. As strong and supernaturally powerful as the word is, even in believers the flesh has the ability to ignore it, to stifle it. We can blithely go about our daily lives paying little or no heed to the percolating strength of God's word. There is *so much* God has given us that, sadly, lies dormant because we do not utilize it, we do not nurture it, cultivate it, *live* it—and live *in* it.

I began this lesson with my old "junior high" Bible. This is how we receive God's word today; there are no longer any Pauls, any Peters or Jameses—and certainly no Christ Jesus walking the earth. No one today speaks *ex cathedra*. This is how we hear and receive God's word. And if we are not regularly reading, studying, ingesting and living this word, we are cutting off a large portion of our life from God—and even worse, we are cutting off a large portion of God's life from ours.

Let's close with a final word from Spurgeon:

Spurgeon: This Gospel, if it is received as the Word of God, comes with power. Do not let us be misunderstood—the power we mean is by no means a common thing! It is not the force of persuasion, nor the energy of rhetoric. It is Divine Power—the finger of God! There is still in the world a miraculous force—the Divine energy of the Holy Spirit. It does not have us speak with tongues, neither do we hear it in rushing, mighty wind. But it is as unmistakable to those who have it as if it did come with such extraordinary signs!

SESSION 11: THE COST OF FAITH, THE COST OF UNBELIEF

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

PREFACE

In Christendom there are two words—“believe” and “faith”—that are so common, so ubiquitous, as to be rendered almost meaningless in our minds. One can believe without having faith, but one cannot have faith without believing. Faith is belief put to the test: For example, I may *believe* that old wooden bridge will hold my weight, but I do not have *faith* until I actually walk across it. Which then brings up the issue: In what do you have faith? Many people have faith—but faith in what? Evolution? Man-made global warming? Aroma therapy? Faith itself tells us that placing our trust in God and His Son Jesus Christ is not just a fanciful, faddish belief system, but—like God’s word itself—something supernatural, powerful, life-changing.

How easy it would have been for the eleven remaining disciples/apostles, after the death of Christ, to just give up, declare the previous three years to have been just a noble experiment that failed, and return to their old life.

- But *faith* told them they were not just dreaming when the risen Christ appeared to them.
- *Faith* told them it was not just a mystical apparition when Jesus ascended into heaven before them.
- *Faith* told them that the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on them on the Day of Pentecost, and the resulting supernatural ability for them to speak in languages not their own, was not because they were drunk.
- Most of all, it was their *faith* that sustained them through the trials and persecution that followed.

Faith in Christ Jesus is far more than just a belief-system—more than simply philosophical assent. It is a way of life; it is, like God’s written word, something real and strong and foundational.

v14

Verse 13, from our previous study sets up v14.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13-14.

In v13 we have both of these God-given forces working together: It was the *faith* of the Thessalonians that told them that the word delivered by Paul was not his, but literally God’s. And both of these—their faith and the word—worked together to sustain them through the many trials to come.

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea,

How? How were they “imitators” of the churches in Judea? Two ways:

First, they imitated the **operational faith** of these earlier churches. As with the original apostles, one does not endure persecution without faith. Absent faith, the typical response is, *Hey, I don’t need this*, and one quickly deserts the cause. As we have already seen, the Thessalonians’ operational faith was put into practice immediately, in imitation of Paul and the Lord Jesus.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7.

for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews,

Second, they imitated the Judean churches by **enduring the sufferings** that came as a result of their obedience to Christ.

The Thessalonians suffered “at the hands of” their own countrymen—but the *instigators* were the same as in Judea: the Jews.

Read Acts 17:5-8.

This follows, for it was the Jews who had more to lose by this new faith in Christ. What did the pagan idolaters or unreligious care that another “god” had been added to the pantheon? But the Jews believed in the *one* God, and, from their perspective, this Messiah was in direct competition for their members. To the pantheists, one could believe in Christ—and anyone else. But to the Jews, one could not follow Christ and be a good Jew. In addition, Paul’s ministry always began at the synagogue, so, as they saw it, he was intentionally stealing his converts from their members.

Read Acts 17:1-2.

The Jews also took issue with the Christian missionaries for not requiring their converts to become Jews first. That is, many Jews who were not outright enemies of The Way, saw it as simply another Jewish sect, requiring one to be a Jew first.

vv15-16

Some commentators take the position that vv15-16 are so harsh and condemnatory of the Jews—so seemingly out of character for Paul, so “un-Pauline”—that they were surely added later (i.e., by someone else). But there is no evidence for this. Nonetheless, as James Denney points out,

There is nothing in his epistles elsewhere that can be compared with this passionate outburst.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16.

In these two verses Paul directs a number of accusations against the Jews:

- They killed the Lord Jesus
- They killed the prophets
- Persecuted/expelled Paul and his fellow missionaries
- They do not please God
- They are antagonistic to all men
- Hindering missionary efforts toward the Gentiles

He concludes that as a result of all this,

- Their cup of transgressions against God is overflowing
- So that God’s wrath against them is already—and in the final day—overflowing

who both killed the Lord Jesus...

Heading the list is the worst offense: they killed Jesus. Of course, they did not drive the spikes or hang him from the cross. But the Romans would not have done any of it—the arrest, the trial, the torture and execution—without the instigation of the Jewish leaders.

And although the politically correct today get into a lather whenever anyone accuses the Jews of killing Jesus, this was certainly the position of the early apostles. For example, on the road to Emmaus—

Read Luke 24:19-20.

—and in Peter’s first sermon after the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Read Acts 2:22-23.

We say ([as I do in Reflections this week](#)) that King Herod “built” the great temple that stood in the time of Jesus; even though no doubt he expended not one drop of sweat doing the actual work, he was certainly *responsible* for the building of the structure. Just so, as the disciples on the road to Emmaus and Peter said, the Jews killed Jesus not because they drove the spikes through His flesh, but because they were *responsible* for it occurring.

and the prophets

And Jesus Himself confirms that the Jews killed the many prophets sent to them by God to speak for Him. In Matthew 23, just after His eight woes pronounced against the scribes and Pharisees, He said,

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.” (Matthew 23:37)

and drove us out.

That had happened before, but most recently in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

They are not pleasing to God but hostile to all men

We need not detail the centuries of disobedience and rebellion by the Jews, their rejection of Yahweh’s laws and idolatry. But consider just this immediate context with Christ.

Robert L. Thomas: By opposing God’s Messiah so strenuously, they became God’s adversaries. This could not help but produce hostility to all men—a hostility arising not from a supposed racial superiority, but one manifested in stubborn resistance to admitting Jesus’ messiahship.

hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved

By working so hard to deny the spread of the gospel, they were denying men and women the salvation and joy that could be found through Christ. Hostile indeed!

with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins.

I want to be careful here and be precise with my words. Paul is speaking here about **Jews that were actively hostile to the Christian faith**. As such they were liable for the full extent of God’s response to sin. They had no savior. The word translated “fill up,” or “heap up” [*anaplerosai*], “points to a well-defined limit of sin appointed by divine decree.” To put it in the vernacular, it is God saying, *That’s it! I’ve had it with you*. The last straw in the Jews’ long history of rebellion and disobedience was their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. With that, their cup of sin was filled to overflowing. Listen to how James Denney describes this.

James Denney: The cup of their iniquity was filling all the time. Every generation did something to raise the level within. The men who bade Amos begone, and eat his bread at home, raised it a little; the men who sought Hosea’s life in the sanctuary raised it further; so did those who put Jeremiah in the dungeon, and those who murdered Zechariah between the temple and the altar. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, the cup was full to the brim. When those whom He left behind to be His witnesses, and to preach repentance and remission of sins to all men, beginning at Jerusalem, were expelled or put to death, it ran over. God could bear no more.

Even though this is directed toward unregenerate Jews, we dare not pass by this without making application to ourselves—but carefully; as [our ex-pastor] counseled me this week, “Trying to apply a passage regarding unbelieving Jews of Paul’s day to believers in our day is fraught with difficulty. Navigate those waters carefully!” The apostle Paul mentions this in his instruction for the ordinance of Communion.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:28-30.

Some in the Corinthian church had even died—i.e., the Lord had taken them home—because of their irreverent behavior around His table. Now let’s read what the apostle John had to say about this in the context of our prayers for each other.

Turn please to 1 John 5:16-17.

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin **not** leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin **not** leading to death. There **is** a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this [*i.e., there is no point praying for this; it is in God’s hands*]. All unrighteousness is sin, and there **is** a sin **not** leading to death. (1 John 5:16-17; emphasis added)

As David Guzik puts it,

Apparently, a believer can sin to the point where God believes it is just best to bring them home, probably because they have in some way compromised their testimony so significantly that they should just come on home to God.

Remember that the word used in our text for “**fill up** the measure of their sins” means “a well-defined limit of sin *appointed by divine decree*.” Here is what sends a chill down my spine: God knows that limit, but we don’t.

But wrath has come upon them to the utmost [lit., to the end].

Now, this verse closes with the consequence for the hostile, unregenerate Jews. They have already qualified for (“has come”) the full force of God’s wrath in the final Day of His Judgment. [The verb is an example of the “now—not yet” tense we became familiar with in our study of Christ in the OT. The Jews have suffered, and are suffering some of this wrath, but the actual, full-force “wrath” will not occur until the final Day of Judgment.]

While we *can* experience His discipline, it is true that this same wrath of God need not be feared by the Christian. Nevertheless, are some of us “filling up the measure of our sins” to the point where the expression of God’s patience toward us on earth is running out, and He must remove us from everything we hold dear on this temporal plane?

SESSION 12: THE ORPHANED BROTHER

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

PREFACE

In our passage today Paul contrasts the despicable behavior of the Jews, as described in vv14-16, with his affectionate yearning for the Thessalonians. Paul declared that the Jews:

- killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets;
- Persecuted and hounded Paul and his fellow missionaries out of the cities they visited;
- Instead of being obedient to God, failed to please Him;
- were antagonistic to all men, because they sought to obstruct the spread of Christ's saving gospel by hindering missionary efforts toward the Gentiles.

In sum, the Jews had more than just an opposing religious view; they were arrogant, self-righteous and narrow-minded—not unlike liberals today who are not satisfied to just argue against a competing view, but are hell-bent on *destroying* anyone who offers anything not inline with their philosophy, or at least *denying* them their voice in the marketplace of ideas.

This contrast, between the Jews and himself, is set off by the first two words of the final paragraph in Chapter Two: "But we"; that is, Paul is saying to the church, *I have just described how the Jews feel about you; here is how I feel about you.*

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20.

v17

Verse 17 is one of the most emotion-packed sentences in all of Paul's letters, but much of that emotion is hidden from our view. It is unfortunate that some of our translations do not express the deep, visceral feelings contained in the original. Among our common versions, the ESV and NIV come closest.

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, (ESV)

But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. (NIV)

This whole paragraph, but especially v17, is an eloquent expression of Paul's true heart for—indeed, his passionate devotion to—those to whom he delivered the gospel of Christ.

But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while

He, of course, addresses them as brothers.

brothers = *adelphoi* = from <G1> (a) (as a connective particle) and **delphus (the womb)**; a brother (literal or figurative) near or remote [much like <H1> ('ab)] :- brother; **from the same womb**.

Paul uses this as no mere formality or boilerplate. The church in Thessalonica was comprised of individuals who were now "from the same womb" as Paul. Each of them had been born again in Christ Jesus—the "firstborn." It was His blood that made them so, and they were further "related" by the Holy Spirit who indwelt each of them

He presses this relational connection further with "having been taken away from you," or "torn away from you." The latter hints at the depth of feeling in the Greek.

were torn away from = *aporphanisthentes* = from <G575> (apo) and a derivative of <G3737> (orphanos); **to bereave wholly**, i.e. (figurative) **separate** (from intercourse) :- take.

Note the word buried inside: “orphan.” It is the picture of a child who has prematurely lost his parents’ they have been “torn away from” him. So much more than just “I miss you,” the word “combines the idea of separation with the mental anguish accompanying it” (Thomas).

And this expression of loss is further intensified by the relatively brief span of time since they had been together: “...for a **short while**” literally means “for the occasion of an hour.” It had been only a few months between Paul’s stay with them and his writing of this letter. With this idiom he is saying that even this brief absence seems an eternity.

in person, not in spirit

Though not necessarily inaccurate, the NASB is an outlier in translating this “spirit.” The word is *kardia* [kar-dee’-ah], and means the heart: the inner man, the seat of the affections and purposes. “Out of sight, not out of mind” (Rutherford).

Paul quickly clarifies the nature of this absence; here in its most succinct form is one of Paul’s favorite thoughts: Because we are “from the same womb,” through the supernatural auspices of Christ and our heavenly Father, we are never truly apart from each other. Thus by long distance he shared in the joys of the Colossian church—

Read Colossians 2:5.

—and handed down his judicial verdict to the Corinthian church.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:3-5.

...were all the more eager with great desire...

If we remove the modifying clauses from the middle of this verse we get the central thought: “But we...were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.” Even removing what we have looked at so far, Paul’s deep longing for the Thessalonians comes through.

all the more eager

endeavored more eagerly

endeavored the more abundantly

made every effort (the NIV reverses the order)

all the **more eager** = *perissoteros espoudasamen* = beyond, **superabundantly**, exceedingly; to use speed, i.e. **to make effort**, be prompt or **earnest** :- do (give) diligence, be diligent (forward), **endeavour**, labour, study.

with great desire

intense longing

with **great desire** = *en pollei epithumiai* = much, many largely; a longing (especially for what is forbidden) :- concupiscence, desire, lust (after).

I don’t want to get so pedantic with this that I put you to sleep, but if you will bear with me for just a moment I believe it is worth our time and effort to burrow down into this last word, translated “desire” or “longing,” to grasp the true intensity of Paul’s longing for these brothers and sisters.

epithumiai from **epithymeō** from **thymos** [noun; **passion** (as if breathing hard) :- **fierceness**, indignation, wrath] from **thyo** [a primary verb; properly to rush (**breathe hard**, blow, smoke), i.e. (by implication) **to sacrifice (properly by fire)**].

In Brown's *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, this word is catalogued under the English heading, "Desire, Lust, Pleasure." It is often used in a bad sense—i.e., unbridled and evil, lustful passions; Paul uses it elsewhere as an expression for the sinful flesh which rules man. Here in our verse he uses it in a good or neutral sense, but we can now understand the passionate intensity with which Paul longed to return to the Thessalonians. And note: even this already intense word he modifies with "great"!

...to see your face.

To what, specifically, was this intense emotion directed? To see (behold) them not just in the heart, but in person—face to face. The word translated "face" [*prosōpon*] includes the idea of presence, person. Paul did not just want to "see" them; he wanted to be in their presence, *with* them.

from the Cambridge Bible: they were parted in sight, not in affection; but true affection longs for sight.

v18

Then in v18 Paul explains to the church why he was not able to return to see them face to face—and in his explanation there is a clue to why he went to such great lengths in the previous verse to express his emotional longing.

Read v18.

I believe one reason for Paul's emotional outburst in v17 was to contrast his affections for the Thessalonians with the lack of same from the Jewish community in their region. But a second reason is hinted at here. Remember: Timothy (and, perhaps, Silas) had returned to Thessalonica; Timothy, later meeting up with Paul in Corinth, is the one who brought news from Thessalonica to Paul, thus giving him cause for writing this first letter.

we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—

There may have been some in the church who were grumbling that Timothy returned to them by himself because Paul didn't care enough about them. Or perhaps some of the local Jews were spreading nasty rumors about Paul's disinterest in the Thessalonica church.

Whatever the reason, Paul felt it necessary not only to pour out his heart in v17, but to further emphasize his *personal* affection for them in his next sentence (v18). *All of us ["we"] wanted to come back to you for a visit—time and again, more than once, I, Paul, personally wanted to see you again.*

Even the word translated "wanted" (*we wanted to come to you*) expresses a strong intention or desire; more than a mere inclination or wish, it was their *will* to come.

and yet Satan hindered us.

But that will was thwarted [*lit., to cut into; like runners in a race*] by no less than Satan. Paul was not one (as some do today) to ascribe every obstacle or inconvenience to the work of the devil. He knew well that God Himself could change their well-intentioned plans—that is what had brought them to Macedonia, instead of Asia, in the first place.

Read Acts 16:6-10.

Even his enlistment in the beginning was the work of Christ changing his plans (Acts 9). But Paul could also recognize the work of Satan, and that he was just preoccupied with ministry elsewhere he would not have attributed to the enemy; Satan would not have encouraged that work either. To the Corinthians Paul wrote, in his second letter to them,

for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes. (emphasis added)

The bottom line is that he dearly wanted to return to Thessalonica, but circumstances organized by Satan, and thus beyond his control, prevented it.

vv19-20

In v19 Paul continues to reassure the Thessalonians of his affection for them—and it is further evidence that his mind is already on what he will be discussing later, in both letters, about the end times.

For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation?

It was not uncommon for Paul to refer to those in the churches he started as his “joy and crown.” To the church he started in Philippi, just before coming to Thessalonica, he said much the same in his letter to them.

Read Philippians 4:1.

[Back to 1 Thessalonians.](#)

Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?

[v20] For you are our glory and joy.

It occurs to me that an examination of this “crown of exultation” or, literally, “crown of boasting,” as the ESV has it, is a perfect example of how the Spirit of God is required for a correct understanding of Scripture.

Absent the Spirit, the world would read these two verses and not surprisingly conclude that Paul would arrive in heaven, stand before the judgment seat [*bema*] and begin bragging about all the souls he had racked up for the Lord. For this service he would then be awarded a golden crown studded with precious gems, which would promote him to favored-son status in the heavenly realms.

With the Spirit, however, we know that that is not the picture at all. First, this crown will not be like the heavy, gold- and gem-encrusted crowns worn by European royalty, such as those stored in the Tower of London. Nor will it be a simple, narrow band, called a *diadema*, holding a tiara.

crown = *stephanos* (stef'-a-nohs)= from an apparently primary **stepho (to twine or wreath)**; a chaplet (as a badge of royalty, **a prize in the public games or a symbol of honor general**; but more conspicuous and elaborate than the simple fillet, <G1238> (*diadema*)), literal or figurative :- crown.

Think of Judah ben Hur mounting the rostrum, and receiving from the governor, Pontius Pilate, the laurel wreath of victory for winning the chariot race. [The crown of thorns worn by Jesus was a *stephanos*.](#)

Will believers be rewarded by Christ? Indeed.

“Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Revelation 22:12-13)

But believers in that moment are not boasting in what *they* have accomplished, but what Christ has graciously accomplished *through* them. As Paul writes to the Corinthians,

But he who boasts is to boast in the Lord. For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends. (2 Corinthians 10:17-18)

Beyond that, if ordinary believers are to follow the pattern of the twenty-four elders in heaven, we will be in possession of our crowns for only a brief moment anyway.

Read Revelation 4:9-11.

SESSION 13: A NECESSARY EMISSARY

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

PREFACE

We now begin Chapter Three. Though it is not part of our passage in this session, I want to look first at v8, for it nicely summarizes the heart of the apostle throughout the chapter.

for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon: Never is the servant of God so full of delight as when he sees that the Holy Spirit is visiting his hearers, making them to know the Lord, and confirming them in that heavenly knowledge. On the other hand, if God does not bless the word of his servants it is like death to them. To be preaching and to have no blessing makes them heavy of heart: the chariot-wheels are taken off, and they drag heavily along; they seem to have no power nor liberty.

Years ago, back in the early 1980s I experienced my first taste of this. The mixed vocal ensemble of which I was a part had just performed my very first musical. **[reminder: “musical” = not composing the music, but taking existing songs and writing a story or narrative around them]** As my first one, it was a rough effort on my part, but the group performed it well. The story line contained a number of emotional moments that had, I found out after the performance, touched some members of the audience deeply. Later that night, at home, I was overwhelmed by thought of the effect it had had on the audience, and I just sat at my desk weeping.

Over time, as the pastor, preacher, teacher, writer or performer witnesses the positive results of ministry, the senses can certainly be enured by familiarity. The venerable pastor does not literally weep for joy every time a parishioner walks the aisle. Nevertheless, as Paul tells the Thessalonians, if they are standing fast—if their faith has remained firm through time and trials after hearing the word—then he, Paul—and any communicator of the gospel—is really living, he is encouraged, he is *revived*.

It is not self-congratulatory; just as Paul knew at the end of the previous chapter that any crown he receives as a reward ultimately belongs to the Lord, the minister knows that credit for any edifying results to his work in the flesh belongs to the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals.

There is a simple but great word for this in the Greek: *dia* (dee-ah'). More often than not this word is translated “through,” and means “the channel of an act.” Not just ordained ministers, but every one of us who serve the Lord are simply channels of His acts—the means by which He accomplishes His sovereign will on earth. We are simply the pipe, the conduit through which He does His work.

The heart of the apostle, so emotionally and spiritually linked to those he had ministered to, is revealed throughout this third chapter. He “really lives” because of the faith and obedience of the Thessalonians. He is encouraged, and pleased, but He does not take credit for who and what they are now. Let’s read our passage.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5.

Sidebar: In Chapter Three Paul repeatedly uses the plural pronouns “we” and “us” to refer to himself alone.

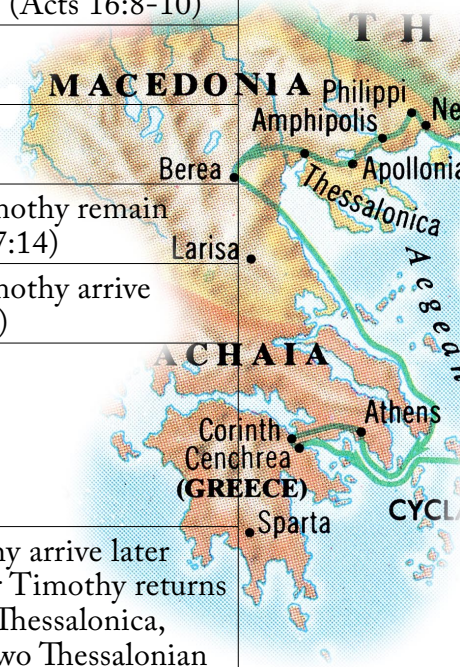
v1

Let’s return to Acts and get our bearings. **[see chart on next page]** Remember, his trip to Macedonia on this occasion was officially part of Paul’s second missionary journey, and with Silvanus (Silas) rather than Barnabas, who accompanied him on his first journey. Also remember that in our text in his first Thessalonian letter, Paul, writing from Corinth, is referring to what had already transpired. Let’s begin with our trio of Paul, Silas and Timothy in Berea, which was their first stop after Thessalonica.

Read Acts 17:14-15

PAUL ALONE

In Philippi	Paul, Silvanus, Timothy	Timothy from Lystra (Acts 16:1-3), Luke from Troas (Acts 16:8-10)
In Thessalonica	Paul, Silvanus, Timothy?	
In Berea	Paul, Silvanus, Timothy	
to Athens	Paul	Silvanus and Timothy remain in Berea (Acts 17:14)
In Athens	Paul	Silvanus and Timothy arrive later (Acts 17:16)
From Athens	Silvanus sent back to Philippi (probably), and Timothy sent back to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:2)	
In Corinth	Paul, with Priscilla and Aquila	Silas and Timothy arrive later (Acts 18:5); after Timothy returns with news from Thessalonica, Paul writes the two Thessalonian letters. (1 Thessalonians 3:6)



The Jews from Thessalonica came down to Berea to run Paul out of that city. While Silas and Timothy remained behind, the Bereans—who “were more noble-minded” (v11)—conducted Paul to safety to the coast. There they caught a ship down the coastline and around the southern peninsulas to Athens. Once in Athens, Paul requested that when they returned to Berea, they send Timothy and Silas to him as soon as possible.

Now, we are not yet at the historic point that Paul refers to in v1. The Bereans have left for home, and Paul is left alone in Athens. Verse 16 reveals his state of mind:

Read v16.

He was provoked, his spirit was stirred within him, he was distressed by all the statues and shrines that represented the pervasive level of idolatry in the city. Reading between the lines, one gets the impression that when he began speaking in the local synagogue, and then moved on to address the Areopagus, that his heart was not in it.

While his message on Mars Hill was eloquent and, somewhat effective, others ridiculed him when he mentioned the resurrection of the dead (v32). He chose not to fight, to argue with them further. But, v33 tells us that, instead, Paul left the city.

Luke does not record when Silas and Timothy arrived in Athens, but we can safely surmise that it was some time prior to Paul’s leaving the city. Now, with Timothy and Silas with Paul in Athens, we finally arrive at the moment he speaks of in v1 of Chapter Three.

Therefore when we could endure it no longer...

Knowing the historical context means that we can now identify the “it.” What could he no longer endure? It wasn’t his loneliness in the city of Athens, because his companions are with him.

we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone,

And when refers to being “left behind at Athens,” he is not referring to when he first arrived from Berea. When he left Berea, Silas and Timothy remained there, then later joined Paul in Athens. While the three were together in that city, Paul decided that he could no longer endure *not knowing how the Thessalonians were getting along*.

Even as miserable as he had been during those earlier days in Athens after the Bereans left, Paul was willing to suffer that loneliness again to send Timothy back to Thessalonica as his messenger and fact-finder. Their welfare was more important to him than his own.

Sidebar: Keeping our time-line straight, Paul writes these words immediately after Timothy returned to him from Thessalonica with his report.

v2

Paul had two reasons for sending Timothy back to Thessalonica:

- v2: to strengthen and encourage their faith
- vv2 & 5: to determine how that faith was holding up under afflictions and temptation and remind them that this was to be expected

Remember, there was nothing about the church in Thessalonica itself that would have given Paul cause for concern. We have learned already in this letter that they received what he said to them as what it truly was—the word of God (v2:13). He had substantial evidence that their faith was real and active—they were already spreading that word throughout Macedonia. So why his concern?

Some things never change, and there is nothing new under the sun. Since before Christ was crucified for our sins in the first century, the temporal culture has been both punishing those who follow Him, and doing everything it can to tempt them away from Him. Faith in Christ was, is, and always will be surrounded by those who despise it. Faith will always dwell in alien territory—not least in our own bodies. Until the moment we cross the threshold of heaven, each individual’s faith will remain at odds with their fleshly nature.

Paul knew this—as does every shepherd concerned for the flock left in his charge. Because before that, he knows it about himself. Ordination does not remove the base nature—in fact, leadership ministry carries within it special temptations of its own. So this had been on Paul’s mind ever since leaving Thessalonica, and he could “endure it no longer.”

Read vv2-3.

strengthen, establish = *sterizo* = from a presumed derivative of <G2476> (histemi) (like <G4731> (stereos)); **to set fast, i.e. (literal) to turn resolutely in a certain direction, or (figurative) to confirm** :- fix, (e-) stablish, stedfastly set, strengthen.

encourage = *parakaleo* = from <G3844> (para) and <G2564> (kaleo); **to call near, i.e. invite**, invoke (by imploration, hortation or consolation) :- beseech, call for, (be of good) **comfort**, desire, (give) **exhort** (-ation), entreat, pray.

Timothy was sent to make sure they were headed in the correct direction, and to bolster their faith—and courage—against affliction. People today need repeated injections of truth—not necessarily because they have forgotten what they learned, or worse, rejected what they learned, but because we dwell in an environment corrosive to faith; it incessantly eats away at us, pulling us in the wrong direction. Timothy returned to Thessalonica to reinforce what they had already learned, and to exhort them to not give in or give up when tribulation or affliction arose.

so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions

In v3, almost every translation chooses a different English word for the Greek word *sainesthai*. Perhaps this is because the word is used to describe the way a dog wags its tail when it greets his master. None of the translations are incorrect, but I think that NKJV has it best, with “shaken.”

disturbed^{nasb}, **shaken**^{nkjv}, **moved**^{kjv, esv}, **unsettled**^{niv} = *sainesthai* = akin to <G4579> (seio); **to wag (as a dog its tail fawningly)**, i.e. (genitive) **to shake** (figurative disturb) :- move; “a state of being shaken or disturbed.” (And what happens when one has been shaken or disturbed? One is off-balance, unsteady on one’s feet.)

Shaken by what?

afflictions, trials^{niv} = *thlipsesin* = from <G2346> (thlibo); **pressure** (literal or figurative) :- afflicted (-tion), anguish, burdened, **persecution, tribulation, trouble**.

for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

Read Acts 14:19-22.

v4

And in v4 Paul confirms that he did indeed tell the Thessalonians this.

Read v4.

Jesus, too, told His disciples the same thing in his discourse recorded in John 15:18-16:4. There He told them that the world hated Him, therefore the world would hate them. Similar to Paul, later, Jesus explained that He was telling them this “so that you may be kept from stumbling.” The word translated stumbling is a different and more intense word than that translated “shaken” or “disturbed” in our v3. But the warning is very much the same.

stumbling = *skandalizo* = **to entrap, i.e. trip up** (figurative stumble [transitive] or **entice to sin**, apostasy or displeasure) :- (make to) offend.

And this is what Paul gets to in the last verse of our passage.

v5

In v5 Paul repeats himself, but adds emphasis to his reason for sending Timothy.

Read v5.

I also sent to find out about your faith,

In v2 he states that he sent Timothy to “strengthen and encourage” their faith; now he adds that he wanted to know the *condition* of their faith from Timothy’s report.

for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.

Of course as he writes this, Paul already knows the answer to this. In his very next sentence (v6) he writes, “But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love...” But earlier, while in Athens, Paul didn’t know the answer; hence, the reasons he sent Timothy, his faithful emissary.

Read Job 1:6-7.

And, of course, we are familiar with what Peter writes in his first epistle.

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. (1 Peter 5:8-9)

Satan never tires of his work of destroying, or at least weakening, the faith of Christians. Paul knew well the work of Satan: he had just written, near the end of Chapter Two of this letter, that more than once he had tried to get back to them, but “Satan hindered us.” As a faithful shepherd, he was concerned that Satan was now at work on the new faith of these young believers, and he wanted to know how they were bearing up.

In our next session, Paul will get his answer.

SESSION 14: THE SLIDING SCALE OF FAITH

1 Thessalonians 3:5-10

PREFACE

As is my wont, when I began looking at this passage—verses 6-10 in 1 Thessalonians—I wondered how best to approach it, to organize it, to teach it. When I reached v10 I was suddenly reminded of a passage in Colossians where Paul used the same disturbing word: “lacking”—only in that letter it has an even more troubling context. After cogitating on v10, I then realized that before digging into the fullness of this passage, we must pause to consider the fullness of this common church word we bandy about so casually: “faith.”

LACKING

Read Colossians 1:24.

At a glance, that is a worrisome statement; what in the world could possibly have been “lacking” in Christ’s afflictions? First off, this word does not mask a more genteel definition: it means precisely what we imagine it does.

lacking = *husteremata* = from <G5302> (hustereo); **a deficit**; specially poverty :- **that which is behind**, (that which was) lack (-ing), penury, **want**; **deficient**, **the shortcomings**, the lacks or left-overs.

So we find no solace in the definition of the Greek, no rounding off of the word’s sharp edges.

Oddly enough, this verse in Colossians is set just after Paul’s eloquent treatise on the *sufficiency* of Christ:

- firstborn of all creation
- creator
- image of the invisible God
- the fullness of God
- before all things, and in Him all things hold together
- the head of the church
- first place in everything

So what could possibly have been “lacking”? Well, when we dug into the text we discovered that, whereas at a glance we might naturally interpret “Christ’s afflictions” to mean His suffering on the cross, the word *thlipsis* is never used in the NT of Christ’s redemptive suffering on the cross. But it is used to describe His and His followers’ *ministerial suffering*—the suffering they experience because of their allegiance to Christ. So this is what Paul means: not suggesting at all that the cross was somehow deficient, or incomplete, but that Christ’s afflictions continue on in His church.

Back to 1 Thessalonians.

At the end of our passage in 1 Thessalonians, Paul does a similar thing. After going on and on about the wonderful faith of the church in Thessalonica, Paul uses the same word, “lacking,” in v10.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10.

In our next session we will dig into the fullness of verses 6-10, but today I want to spend some time examining that which is compelled by this phrase, “complete what is lacking in your faith,” and what is so ubiquitous in our vernacular—indeed, the vernacular even of the world’s culture—the simple, yet profound word, “faith.”

As I read our passage, backing up to include v5, note the highlighted references to faith.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:5-10.

SANCTIFICATION

We make a mistake, and we severely handicap our relationship with God in Christ, when we think of it as something established, finished, static. “I’m saved—and that’s that.” Instead, we are to think of our relationship with God in Christ as *dynamic*. We have often discussed this regarding the term “sanctification”—that is, there is indeed an aspect of sanctification that is complete: we are once and for all made holy by Christ’s sacrifice.

Read Hebrews 10:8-10.

In the same passage, however—just as he does in Chapter Two of Hebrews (2:11)—in addition to referencing the established fact of sanctification, the writer references the *ongoing process* of sanctification.

Read Hebrews 10:14. (ESV or NKJV)

“...are being sanctified” is the preferred translation, since it is the present passive articular participle of *hagiazō*.

In our studies I have often associated this process of sanctification with what I call our “upward glide-slope to heaven”—what the prophet Isaiah termed “the Highway of Holiness.”

Read Isaiah 35:8-9.

At conversion ([from flesh-kind to spirit-kind](#)) we are once-for-all sanctified by the atoning sacrifice of Christ. But at the moment of conversion we also find ourselves on the threshold of—just the starting point—of that upward glide-slope to heaven. As we grow and mature in Christ we rise higher, closer to His likeness. The active, dynamic, attentive Christian does not spend the rest of his time on earth traveling a level path of mediocrity, then, at death, suddenly vaults through the golden gates. No, over his remaining lifetime he treads a path that gradually slopes upward toward Christ-likeness.

FAITH

Just so “faith.” Our culture today has ground down the hard granite of this word into a fine talc that is utterly worthless. We all have heard, and no doubt we all have used the term, “a person of faith.” But what does that really mean? [\[answer: nothing at all\]](#) I can have faith in myself; faith in another person; faith in Sobek, the crocodile god of the Nile; faith in a crystal to cure every ache and pain in my body—all of these would make me a person of faith.

Faith is a one-time event: At conversion we purposefully place our faith, or trust, in Jesus Christ; that is what marks us a Christian, or Christ-ian. That act, if sincere and authentic, need never be repeated. It is good for eternity—but it *is* essential. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that

...without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

Faith, after all, is so essential that it comes from God Himself:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9; cf. John 6)

But God’s word makes it clear that faith, like sanctification, is also an ongoing process, with ebbs and flows, with ups and downs, mountain-tops and deep valleys. In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul shows that he is very much aware of the fragility of human faith. ([Look again at handout](#))

v5: *I also sent to find out about your faith*

He honestly didn’t know what might have happened to their faith since his departure

v6: *good news of your faith*

Yes, it was in good condition right now

v7: *we were comforted about you through your faith*

to the extent that Paul took strength in it

v8: *if you stand firm in the Lord*

But this doesn't mean that this is a permanent condition; their faith could still waver

v10: *and may complete what is lacking in your faith*

Because of this Paul wants to reconnect with the Thessalonians to bolster their faith, to continue their education and growth in this vital connection they have with God in Christ

Turn to Romans 14.

In the fourteenth chapter of Romans Paul speaks at length about how faith differs from person to person.

Read Romans 14:1.

weak = *astheneo* = from <G772> (asthenes); **to be feeble** (in any sense) :- be **diseased, impotent** folk (man), (be) sick, (be, be made) weak.

In v4 Paul makes it clear that this is not a fatal condition, but that God is at work in the lives of both the one of weak faith and the one of strong faith.

Read Romans 14:4.

In v22 we see that in many respects, our faith—i.e., the maturity level of our faith—is a private thing; there is no universal standard.

NASB: The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God.

ESV: The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.

What *is* universal is the call for our faith, at whatever level it may be, to grow—to deepen and mature. We know from Scripture that faith in any individual will naturally—that is, *involuntarily*—have its ups and downs. But more than that we are to make it our occupation to *voluntarily*, purposefully increase our faith. After all, God has given us our spiritual leaders not just to win souls, but to instruct and encourage the maturing of faith in those who already believe.

Read Ephesians 4:11-14.

Why? Well in a large part to stop (or at least minimize) that involuntary ebb and flow of faith so common to man.

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; (Ephesians 4:14)

So, just as with sanctification (holiness), an individual's faith is meant to travel that upward glide-slope to heaven. Day by day, in incremental steps, our faith is to be rising, deeper, more grounded, more knowledgeable, more mature, until the day when our faith becomes sight.

And what happens to our faith if it is not growing, increasing? Well, what happens to anything moving forward on an incline when it stops advancing? It begins to slide backwards. The idea of remaining static in the Christian life does not reflect reality. Regarding both sanctification and faith, when one is not progressing, one is regressing; when one is not advancing upward, one is slipping backwards.

If our faith is not deepening, maturing, it is not static but growing weaker. Not just God's word, but personal experience bears this out.

Let's close with a passage from Colossians that puts it in perspective.

Read Colossians 3:1a. [only]

Now, if we stopped there, we might imagine it continuing with “...take your ease, since your salvation is in the bag.” But in fact what follows is truly amazing.

Read Colossians 3:1-4.

Even when we are “in Christ”—a redeemed, justified, sanctified Christian—we are to

- keep seeking the things above
- set our mind on things above

Every believer is to have a faith that never stops traveling upward, on that “Highway of Holiness,” that upward glide-slope to heaven.

SESSION 15: GOOD NEWS FOR A FEARFUL SHEPHERD

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

PREFACE

In his letter back to the church in Thessalonica, Paul, in Chapter Three, has been writing an account of the decisions he made after leaving their city. How when he arrived in Athens, rather than keep Timothy with him he sent him back to Thessalonica “to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith,” and to find out, through Timothy, how their faith was holding up. Beginning in v6 Paul then speaks of the encouragement *he* has received from the report Timothy brought back with him.

In our last session we discussed the word so prominent in this chapter: five times in Chapter Three Paul uses the word faith (*pistis*)—six times referring to their faith if one includes “if you stand firm in the Lord” (v8). In this session, as promised, we will examine the passage itself.

A SHEPHERD’S HEART

Reading through this passage a number of times, I got to thinking about the relationship Paul had with these churches. More than just an evangelist, or “church-starter,” Paul was to all these churches a pastor in absentia; even though many miles from them, he did everything he could to counsel them, make decisions for them in important matters (Corinth), and support and encourage their faith—that is, to shepherd them. Then I got to thinking, again, about how concerned he was for the spiritual well-being of the church in Thessalonica, expressed in v5.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:5.

Then I asked, Why? I had a hunch about the reason, so I did a quick survey of all Paul’s letters to churches. Here is what I discovered:

Church	On-site Leaders
Rome	Priscilla & Aquila, Andronicus & Junias, Urbanus, Tryphaena & Tryphosa, Persis
Corinth	Stephanas, plus
Ephesus	Tychicus
Philippi	Epaphroditus, plus overseers & deacons (v1:1)
Colossae	Epaphras, Nympha
Thessalonica?	no individuals named, but note 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.
Galatia	the only other church where no leaders are mentioned—and look at all the troubles they were having: (<i>I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel. Galatians 1:6</i>)

So while the evidence seems to be that there *were* indeed local leaders in Thessalonica, since they were unnamed, the impression is that perhaps they, too, (along with the congregation) were new and inexperienced. This may explain Paul’s strident concern in v5:

For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.

Sidebar: If “the tempter” can be at work in the life of an individual Christian (and we know he is), he can be just as active in the work of the collective body of Christians (and we know he is). Thus, even as we assist *each other* in our walk, we must never discount the importance of a shepherd and his fellow overseers in guarding the integrity of the flock—the church.

v6

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10.

One can *hear* the joy—and relief—in Paul’s words as he relates to the Thessalonians how he received the news from Timothy.

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news...

After all that time in the dark over their spiritual condition, Paul was overjoyed to hear the “good news” from Timothy—and instead of a more common word, he uses a more exalted one—the same word he would for evangelize, or preach the gospel.

good news = *euangelizo* = from <G2095> (eu) and <G32> (aggelos); to **announce good news** (“evangelize”) **especially the gospel** :- declare, bring (declare, show) glad (good) tidings, preach (the gospel); **this is the only place where Paul uses this not in reference to the gospel of Christ.**

The context and the words Paul uses reveal that this was immediate. The picture is one of Timothy rushing in, informing Paul that everything was good with the Thessalonians, and Paul immediately penning this letter.

...of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us,

What was this “good news”? That their faith was solid, and—how *personal* this is!—that they still loved the men who had ministered to them **[not brotherly love, but *agape*]**, and had good memories of them. **[Better: kindly remembrances (Vincent)]**

Chrysostom: So great a good does he consider their confirmation to be. And thus he, the bringer of glad tidings, himself receives the glad tidings of the Divine work, the fruit of his gospel.

This is not unique to Paul; how sweet these words must be to the ears of *any* shepherd.

Read 3 John 2-4.

longing to see us just as we also long to see you,

This affection was mutual.

vv7-8

for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith;

Faith in Christ Jesus does not just bind us together in a philosophical sense; the faith that binds us together in and through Christ has tangible, practical application.

The “distress and affliction” Paul refers to would include **[all from Acts 16-18]**

- beating and imprisonment in Philippi (Acts 16:22-24)
- forced to leave Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-10)
- forced to leave Berea (Acts 17:13-14)
- alone and lonely in Athens (Acts 17:16-33)
- goes alone to Corinth (Acts 18:1)

Beyond these and more—which would be extraordinary in our time and place, the United States—Paul suffered from the same “distress and affliction” experienced by any good shepherd: a deep concern for the sheep in his flock—and for Paul this meant believers scattered across many lands. They were always in his prayers, and thus the concern was handed up to the Lord. But he was also human, and this letter alone gives evidence that he also suffered a fleshly worry over the plight and spiritual health of all those he had left behind in the many churches.

Sidebar: Just imagine how this concern—and yes, even worry and fear—was compounded for Paul. The average pastor of the average-sized church today has enough on his plate, as he shepherds and ministers to the members of his flock. But for Paul this was multiplied many times over; we know from his letters that he prayed over individuals, by name, in all the churches that had been formed in his travels. From my earliest years I recall the many evangelists that visited the First Baptist Temple in Marshalltown, then others that visited churches I attended elsewhere as an adult. Even though they may have been earnest and sincere while in our midst, and may have later prayed for the church as a whole, I can’t imagine that years later they were still praying over and concerned about the faith of many *individuals* in those many churches. But we know from his letters that Paul was.

...we were comforted about you through your faith;

So, as we might expect, hearing the good news about the condition of their faith—and, as Paul puts it, through the very channel of their faith (*dia*) he was comforted (*parakaleo*). This was not unique with the Thessalonians; when Titus brought good news from Corinth, Paul had the same response.

Read 2 Corinthians 7:4.

[Back to 1 Thessalonians.](#)

for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

If v8 seems like an odd statement to you—as it did to me, at first—then I contend that is the result of seepage of the fallen world’s mindset into our understanding of Scripture. The world would answer this statement with *Why should the quality of one’s life be dependent on the level of faithful obedience in people so far away?*

This response ignores a fundamental spiritual truth that is utterly alien, even repulsive, to a fallen world: Christians no longer belong to themselves. As we cited in our last session,

For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:3)

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. (Philippians 1:21)

So Paul’s life was consumed, if you will; it was utterly handed over to Christ and his work for Christ. That was not his occupation, it was not his avocation, it was not his hobby; it was his *life*—because his life had been handed over to Christ. So in that life—his life living in Christ, and Christ living in him—if there were not results of that, if he traveled here and there and this journey, to this city and this town and nothing happened, if it seemed to be all for naught, for him it was as good as being dead.

Can you imagine what that would feel like? It is sadly true that many *do* experience that. From their perspective, it’s all been for naught. If they truly are living for Christ, and obeying him and serving him, then it is *not* for naught; there are results they are not aware of, or they will not be aware of till later. So when you turn this around and say what he says here in 1 Thessalonians, “now I really *live*,” he’s really alive hearing how well the Thessalonians are doing, and he prays that they will continue in the faith—in their life in Christ.

Let us remain mindful of and sensitive to the pastor’s heart, and the importance to him that his work is bearing fruit. Listen to how Charles Haddon Spurgeon put it in his sermon based on v8. He entitled his sermon, “The Pastor’s Life Wrapped Up with His People’s Steadfastness.”

Again, how often have I seen fears which have crept into my soul driven away by my dear people! This is a time of fear, when all Solomon's men that keep watch about his bed had need, each one, to carry his sword drawn because of fear in the night. Yet, when I have seen God's people steadfast, my fears have fled! Yes, I have said the Lord keeps the feet of His saints. He is as a wall of fire round about His own. If it were possible, the powers of evil would deceive the very elect—but it is not possible! The saints are steadfast and each steadfast one cheers his minister and helps him to lay aside his anxieties and to rejoice in the certainty that the Gospel will triumph!

The steadfast become our life by stimulating us to greater exertion. I believe that the steadfast help the minister to a high degree of usefulness. When the man of God sees his people living to God at a high rate of piety, he speaks many things which otherwise he never would have spoken. He glories in the work of God and with no bated breath or trace of hesitation, he points to his people and cries, "See what God has done!" He exults over his converts with a holy joy. He cries, "See what they used to be and what they are now! See how life has been made to spring up in the midst of death and how the Light of God shines, where before, darkness reigned."

Here is expressed the pastor's heart—the shepherd's heart for the flock.

We must not forget that the life of a church is circular, mutually reciprocal: just as the shepherd feeds his flock, the flock feeds the shepherd. Both are important to the health of the church.

v9

Grammatically, v9 or vv9-10 (depending on your translation) is a question, but Paul is not *really* asking a question; it is just another way for him to express the joy he feels because of the Thessalonian believers.

Read vv9-10.

Note: In v9 Paul has two subjects of thankfulness: the Thessalonians' fidelity, and his own joy over that fidelity.

Because of both time constraints and the way Paul has organized his thoughts here at the end of this chapter, we are going to take brief look at vv9-10 in *this* session, then return in our next to blend it into the next three verses.

Verses 9 and 10 are a practical result of v8 [just as (we will see in our next session) vv11-13 are a practical result of v10]. In v8 Paul tells them that now he really lives, and in vv9-10 he paints for them a picture of what that living looks like. It is one filled with thankfulness and joy and earnest prayer.

Note that here, just as he does in his other letters, Paul renders thanks *to God* for the Thessalonians—not to them. And consider that word "render" for a moment.

render = *antapodidōmi* = from <G473> (anti) and <G591> (apodidomi); to requite (good or evil) :- **recompense**, render, **repay**.

For this reason the NIV is a little too thin; it includes the "in return" of the other translations, but leaves out "render." More than just being thankful, or giving thanks, Paul is by his thanksgiving seeking to *repay*—if only in small measure—what God has done for him in the good news from Thessalonica. He is filled with joy, and he knows that that joy is a gift from God.

And that joy makes him all the more desirous to see his brothers and sisters in person—to see them face to face, and continue teaching them, deepening their faith in Christ.

SESSION 16: A SHEPHERD'S PRAYER

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

PREFACE

To rightly appreciate verses 11-13 of 1 Thessalonians 3, we need to understand the flow of Paul's thoughts in this passage of his letter. Let's begin by considering the passage, from v6, in big chunks.

Verse 6 ("But now...") is the turning point in the chapter; before that Paul has been expressing his worry over the spiritual health of the Thessalonians. In v6 he receives the good news from Timothy, and in v8 he places the exclamation point on his relief with, "Now we really live!"

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were so filled with joy, and praise to God, that you felt you would burst, and you had this overwhelming urge that you needed to *do* something with all this joy. Well, that's where Paul finds himself in v9; he is so bubbling over with joy because of the news Timothy has brought, that he wonders out loud what he can do with it.

For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account,

In v10 he concludes that he can *pray*—pray for the opportunity to return to them, and reinforce what had already been accomplished.

Then after answering his own question in v10, he proceeds to close out this passage in his letter with the words of his actual prayer.

vv9-10

In our last session I promised a deeper examination of vv9-10, and here it is. The NASB, KJVs and ESV treat vv9-10 as one sentence—one question. But I was intrigued by the NIV, which stops the question at v9, then seems to answer the question with v10.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10 (in NIV!)

Now, I am not in the habit of blindly accepting the interpretation of the NIV when it is an outlier. But this seemed to make sense to me. Listen to how *The Message* paraphrases this passage:

What would be an adequate thanksgiving to offer God for all the joy we experience before him because of you? We do what we can, praying away, night and day, asking for the bonus of seeing your faces again and doing what we can to help when your faith falters.

Lange Commentary

I recently began using as one of my references the old and well-respected commentary on the Bible by Dr. John P. Lange. He was born in 1802, and this work, in German, was begun in 1857, with a subsequent edition in English. This massive commentary has (in my experience, at least) a fairly unique organization: Each passage is addressed from three perspectives, or with three treatments:

- Exegetical and Critical [\[most daunting to the layman\]](#)
- Doctrinal and Ethical [\[more familiar commentary treatment\]](#)
- Homiletical and Practical [\[application, quotes from other scholars\]](#)

Why am I telling you all this? There's a reason. In Lange's examination of vv9-10 of our passage in the first, exegetical section, he points out that "Luther and Von Gerlach take v10 as the answer to v9 : What thanks? in that we pray." Regarding that, he concludes, "A fair sense, but too artificial," then proceeds to give the grammatical reason for interpreting the Greek as does the KJV and [\(in our time\)](#) the NASB, NKJV and ESV. That is, the two verses comprise one long question.

But then I was amused by what he writes about v10 in the next, Doctrinal and Ethical, section.

What we could not allow grammatically, that the prayer is the answer to the question, “What thanks can we render?” is yet perfectly true in reality. Prayer is the chief part of thanksgiving (Heidelberg Catechism), according to the riches, that is, of God’s goodness, which we honor by receiving out of its fullness grace for grace. Supplication is thus thanksgiving, and leads to thankfulness for what has been already received, as on the other hand thanksgiving is supplication for the continuance of the blessing, and impels to further and unceasing supplication.

So he wants it both ways! He says that according to the rules of Greek grammar, one must translate it as does the KJV—and the NASB, NKJV and ESV. But in practice, it makes perfect sense to treat v10 as the answer to the question in v9—as does the NIV. And it is my contention that the larger passage, seen as a whole, would indicate that this was Paul’s train of thought in the first place.

1. A revival of his spirit because of the good news brought by Timothy (v8)
2. Wondering how to rightly express his overflowing joy and thanksgiving (v9)
3. The answer? To pray for the chance to see them again (v10)
4. Followed by the actual content of his prayer (vv11-13)

And now we are ready to look at the text of Paul’s prayer—although,

[One commentator] points out that this is technically not a prayer. “Recognition should be given to the fact that in actual statement these verses do not form a prayer addressed directly to God. They are rather a devout prayer-wish... the solemn tone of this fervent prayer-wish approaches the language of prayer and is virtually a prayer.” (Hiebert in Guzik)

v11: PRAYER FOR REUNION

The Prayer

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;

Part of the good news Paul received from Timothy was that the Thessalonians were “longing to see us just as we also long to see you” (v6). Hiding beneath the translation of this verse is a demonstration of the tri-unity of the Godhead, for the verb (direct) is singular, though there are multiple subjects; he is asking it of “He who is at once God and our Father” (JFB) and “Jesus our Lord.” The verb is singular, implying that the subject, the Father and Son, are but one in essential Being.

The Answer

Paul’s prayer was answered during his third missionary journey, about five years after he wrote this letter.

Turn to Acts 20 and the handout map.

As Acts 20 begins we find Paul in Ephesus.

Read Acts 20:1.

In a succinct, condensed account, v2 covers his trip from Ephesus to Philippi, down through the Macedonian cities—including Thessalonica, and down to Greece. Verse 4 lists those who accompanied him—and note that they are all representatives from the cities where he had started churches. I don’t find evidence that when Paul left Greece, returning to Philippi, he stopped over in Thessalonica, but my favorite reference for harmonizing the life of Paul, by Frank J. Goodwin, shows this stop on his map.

So God *did* answer Paul’s desire and prayer in the affirmative—five years later.

[Back to Thessalonians.](#)

V12: PRAYER FOR THEIR MATURITY

The Prayer

and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you;

The road toward spiritual maturity does not reach its end until we pass over the threshold of heaven. No matter how “old” we are in the faith, we are to continue growing in the Lord.

Paul has already had evidence that the Thessalonians were on this road, but still he encourages them to press on. Note what he writes immediately after this prayer:

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

The “Answer”

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3.

V13: PRAYER FOR THEIR SANCTIFICATION

The Prayer

[a bit more challenging]

so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

Six months ago, when I pitched the Thessalonian letters to Pastor Jeremy as our next class, he approved, but made the point that I needed to be prepared for some challenging passages in these two letters—especially regarding the end times. I didn’t ignore this counsel, but felt confident that I had the resources to handle the study.

So, for almost sixteen sessions I’ve been cruising along, handling the text without any undue anguish. Then, at the bottom of page three of my notes, turning to the last verse, my confidence ground suddenly to a halt. Reading the verse several times, I had some initial questions for which I could not find the answers. But finally, the venerable Andrew Murray (1828-1917) came to my rescue, pointing me in the right direction. Murray was pastor, missionary and devotional writer, perhaps best known for his exquisite volume, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*.

The apostle’s motive—behind this verse, this prayer, behind this letter, behind his being in Thessalonica in the first place—is their sanctification, their holiness before a holy God. That is the primary thrust of this verse, and it comes out of his call for them to abound in *agape* love for not just their brothers and sisters in Christ, but for all people. Here is also another brief reference to the end times (as in 2:19) before his longer discussions later in this letter and in the next.

First Problem

The first thing that sidetracked me was “at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.” Immediately the image in my head (as it may be for you) was of the triumphant Christ coming down out of the clouds, either to call the redeemed home, or coming in judgment after that. But wait a minute: it says, “**with** all His saints.” In just about every instance of this word (*hagioi*) in the NT, it refers to redeemed *humanity*—not angels. See the problem? Christ will return to *collect* redeemed humanity, they will not be accompanying Him in His descent.

Second Problem

Before we resolve this, here is the second thing that sidetracked me: when I read, “so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father” I misinterpreted it because I had missed something important in the previous two verses; note *who is doing what* in these two verses:

Now may our **God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct** our way to you; and may **the Lord cause you to** increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; (emphasis added)

Because I missed that in those two verses, I missed it in the third.

so that **He may establish** your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. (emphasis added)

Do you see? In everything Paul is praying for, He knows that ultimately it is *the Lord* who will cause it to happen. So in v13 I initially thought Paul was saying that he wanted them to “increase and abound in love” for others, and this would qualify them to stand before “our God and Father” without blame in holiness—which, of course, would mean that our actions on earth make us holy before God. [Not!]
But what Paul is really saying is similar to what Jude wrote in his oft-repeated, eloquent doxology.

Read Jude 1:24-25.

Our holiness is in God’s hands. Through the atonement and justification of His Son, through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, through God the Father hearing and answering our prayers—through the power of the Godhead as a whole we are made holy, and righteous before the *bema* (bay’-ma), the judgment seat of Christ, not through our own efforts, loving or not.

And here is what Andrew Murray wrote that knocked some sense into me:

The words he speaks in regard to the holiness they might aim at and expect, because God was going to work it in them, are so grand that many Christians pass them by, as practically unintelligible: “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love, to the end He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.” That promises holiness, unblamable holiness, a heart unblamable in holiness, a heart established in all this by God Himself... The Church believes so little in the mighty power of God, and the truth of His Holy Covenant, that the grace of such heart-holiness is hardly spoken of. The verse is often quoted in connection with “the coming of our Lord Jesus with His saints”; but its real point and glory [is] that when He comes we may meet Him with hearts established unblamable in holiness by God Himself: all too little this is understood or proclaimed or expected.

Resolution

Now, back to the first problem. This is resolved by understanding that the word translated “coming” (of our Lord Jesus) can also mean “presence.”

coming = *parousia* = from the presumed participle of <G3918> (pareimi); **a being near, i.e. advent** (often, return; specially of Christ to punish Jerusalem, or finally the wicked); (by implication) physical aspect :- coming, **presence**.

This is the standard word for the return of Christ during the end times, and can, indeed, refer to His descent from the clouds—but as Robert L. Thomas points out, it can also refer to the *extended visitation*. The *parousia* of Christ can include His descent, His gathering of the elect, the return to heaven “with all His saints,” and—the real setting for this verse—the moment each of us stands before Christ and the Father for our lives to be evaluated.

What this is talking about is “the perseverance of the saints,” the perseverance of their salvation. If we are truly in Christ—if we are truly saved—then *He* will “establish our hearts without blame in holiness.” Paul’s prayer is that in that day, when he, the apostle, stands before the *bema* of Christ “with all His saints,” the Thessalonians will be there as well, standing there without blame, in the holiness that only Christ can produce in our hearts.

SESSION 17: THE AUTHORITY OF THE LORD

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

PREFACE

Before we read and examine the details of our passage, I want to bring to your attention a pattern in the text. In the earliest moments of any study it is a good idea to look for patterns, or repetitions in the text, for this will often give clues as to what is of uppermost importance to the writer. And here—especially in the first three verses—something stands out: As he begins to offer sharper exhortation to the Thessalonians, Paul goes out of his way to establish the source of his authority.

v1: in the Lord Jesus

v2: by the authority of (or through) the Lord Jesus

v3: this is the will of God

And what is Paul's ultimate motive behind this exhortation?

v1: that they would "please God"

There is the pattern; Paul makes it clear that he is not speaking out of school, but for the Lord. This lends weight and authority to what he writes.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2.

v1

The first word of v1 signals that Paul is beginning to wrap things up in this letter. Now, being Paul, this does not necessarily mean that the end is in sight. In this letter it means he has two more chapters to go—and not until v13 of this chapter will he even launch into this letter's most important topic.

This first word hearkens back not just to the end of Chapter Three, but to the previous two chapters. Several commentators have paraphrased his references:

Since our relations with you have been such as they have, since we have labored so much among you, since you have suffered for the gospel's sake, since there is yet progress to be made, since we have maintained a continuing prayerful interest in you, we ask you, brothers, and urge you in the Lord Jesus...

First Paul categorizes what he is about to ask and expect from the church.

request, urge, beseech, ask = *erotomen* = apparently from <G2046> (ereo) [compare <G2045> (ereunao)]; **to interrogate**; by implication to request :- ask, beseech, **desire, intreat**, pray. Compare <G4441> (punthanomai).

exhort, urge = *parakaloumen* = from <G3844> (para) and <G2564> (kaleo); to call near, i.e. invite, invoke (by imploration, hortation or consolation) :- **beseech**, call for, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) **exhort** (-ation), **entreat**, pray.

The first word is a gentle, friendly request, and the latter is an authoritative apostolic plea; *such urging is more than a request, but less than a command.* (Thomas)

But Paul wants them to know that he is not just doing this on his own; what follows he urges "in the Lord Jesus"—that is, in communion with the Lord Jesus (JFB); similar to how we end our prayers: speaking by the authority of, or as a representative for Christ, united with His mind.

And once again Paul combines exhortation with affirmation ("just as you actually do walk"); when they had been in their midst, the missionaries had given the new church instruction on how they were to live as Christians ("instruction" in the NASB, and "instructed" in the NIV are inserted; they are implied by the "you received from us how you ought to walk.")

that you excel still more

Let us consider for a moment this encouragement Paul adds to excel or abound still more (or more and more).

excel, abound = *perisseuete* = from <G4053> (perissos); **to superabound (in quantity or quality)**, be in excess, be superfluous; also (transposed) to cause to superabound or excel :- (make, more) abound, (have, have more) abundance, (be more) abundant, be the better, enough and to spare, **exceed, excel**, increase, be left, redound, remain (over and above).

still more, more and more = *mallon* = neuter of the comparative of the same as <G3122> (malista); (adverb) **more (in a greater degree)** or rather :- + better, × far, (the) more (and more), (so) much (the more), rather.

Subtle variations in our translations offer us two ways of interpreting this—and we get wonderful application from both. This is a call for upward sanctification—essentially, that we should never be satisfied with the status quo in our walk with Christ Jesus.

Human Effort and Desire

We see the first way to interpret this in the NASB, NKJV, ESV, and most explicitly, the NIV:

Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

This is a familiar theme for the apostle; perhaps its most eloquent expression is found in his letter to the church in Philippi.

Read Philippians 3:12-14.

There is a place in the Christian walk for human endeavor—desire translated into effort. We, like the Thessalonians, are to make an effort to do those things that please God, and walk away from those things that displease Him.

And the writer to the Hebrews says something similar, but also includes a statement that hints at a second interpretation for our verse in Thessalonians.

God's Effort and Desire

Read Hebrews 6:1-3.

Note that hint in v3: God has a part in our efforts toward maturity, sanctification.

[Now back to 1 Thessalonians.](#)

Again, here is how the NIV translates our clause (which it does as a complete sentence):

Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

Now compare that to the KJV:

...how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more.

Young's Literal Translation handles it in a similar way:

...how it behoveth you to walk and to please God, that ye may abound the more,

Do you hear the difference? These two translations could be interpreted to mean that the *result* of walking in a way that pleases God is that we will abound more and more. That is, our growth in sanctification is not just from trying harder, but is God's response to our obedience!

I believe both are true: We, in ourselves, should never settle for the status quo, but our desire and effort should always be for the upward climb of our sanctification. But there is also a natural flow to this—a *spiritual* natural flow,

as it were; the customary way God works in our lives—where we *will* excel still more if we obey Him as to how we should be conducting our lives in Him.

v2

For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

The “instructions” of the NIV and ESV is not inaccurate, but thin.

commandments, instructions = *parangelias* = from <G3853> (paraggello); a mandate :- charge, command; a military term, order from above.

Unlike the word translated “request” in v1 (*erotomen*), this word (*parangelia*) is no request or suggestion, but a command. When I was in the navy, and an officer issued you an order to do something, you did not argue the point, or suggest doing something else, but sharply saluted, and answered, “Aye aye, sir.” We need not soften this word with the filter of today’s political correctness; Paul here refers to his commands for the Thessalonians to behave a certain way. But we do need to point out a couple things.

1. The apostle Paul typically limited this practice to brand new churches, which, young in the faith, required a stronger, more specific hand. He seldom employed it to more established churches. [e.g., *our dealings with “young” believers*]
2. Here, as elsewhere, when Paul gives these commands, he makes sure to specify that they are not his, but the Lord’s.

Matthew Henry: The apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ were only commissioned by him to teach men to observe all things whatsoever he had commanded them (Matthew 28:20). Though they had great authority from Christ, yet that was to teach men what Christ had commanded, not to give forth commandments of their own. They did not act as lords over God’s heritage (1Peter 5:3), nor should any do so that pretend to be their successors. The apostle could appeal to the Thessalonians, who knew what commandments he gave them, that they were no other than what he had received from the Lord Jesus.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 7.

In 1 Corinthians we have examples of Paul making the same distinction, but not always using the same word; these examples also broach the topic Paul next addresses in our Thessalonian text: sexual purity, which we will look at in our next session. Note how the apostle differentiates between council or advice, and command.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:8-9.

Here Paul offers personal counsel (“I say”) that it is best to remain unmarried.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

To those who are already married, however, he “commands” [form of our previous word, *parangelia*] that they remain married. This he can command because it comes from “not I, but the Lord.” Then in the next verse he addresses the topic of divorce for those who have after marriage become believers, or whose spouse has become a believer. This he offers as personal advice—i.e., *not* a command.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:12-13.

Later in this chapter he applies the same method in dispensing counsel to those who are virgins: “Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.” (v25)

[Back to 1 Thessalonians.](#)

In our passage Paul makes clear that he is speaking to them “in the Lord Jesus,” and (v2) “by the authority of the Lord Jesus.” This is not arrogance on his part, nor does he fear they will reject his claim to authority. In the first 12 verses of Chapter Two Paul goes on at length, explaining the righteous and unselfish nature of their speech and behavior. Then in v13 he expresses to God his appreciation for the Thessalonians’ understanding and acceptance of this.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

When we began this study, I didn’t realize that it was going to be such a wonderful *biographical* study of the apostle Paul. What we are seeing in these two letters is that, after the Christ Jesus, Paul is a pretty good role model for us.

And not least among his admirable character traits is his willingness to be subsumed within the authority and rule of his Lord. This does not render him a meek milquetoast; quite to the contrary, this *empowers* him with the knowledge that not just his intentions, but his very words and actions are just and true, because they are being guided from above.

And what is his intention? Why is he doing this? He joins with God the Father and the Lord Jesus in the first part of v3: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” It is all for them, the Thessalonians, and their standing before God.

SESSION 18: IN PURITY AND HONOR

1 Thessalonians 4:3-5

PREFACE

Last week we finished by including the first part of v3, in a general sense, as a wrap-up to the first two verses of Chapter Four, which are about Paul exhorting the Thessalonians to live lives pleasing to God. But in this specific context, Paul uses the first part of v3 to launch into an exhortation for them to live lives of sexual purity.

We have no evidence beyond this passage—if even that—that Paul has in mind any specific individuals or transgressions within the church regarding this. It may just be that He felt it important to include this counsel, since most in this church had come out of pagan, idolatrous backgrounds—where the cultural and moral standards would have been dramatically different.

Background

Let's begin in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem Council, which was called so that the Christian faith might establish some fundamental requirements for new converts. In v1 we find the triggering event for the council.

Read Acts 15:1.

As we learned in our study of Galatians, these were the "Judaizers"—Jewish Christians who saw Christianity not as a separate faith system, but as a sect of Judaism. They wanted to establish a *Jewish* baseline of fundamentals to which every Christian must hold. As we read in v2, "the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue."

The Pharisees in attendance were of the opinion that Christians should be required to obey the Mosaic law (v5), but the apostle Peter was most eloquent in steering the council toward the autonomy of the Christian faith.

Read Acts 15:10-11.

Thus, in what we today would call the *final communique* issued by the council, they wrote and delivered to the churches the statement pertinent to our study:

Read vv28-29.

that you abstain from... fornication

Here is the Greek word found in our Thessalonian text (v4): *porneias*

fornication, sexual immorality = *porneias* = from <G4203> (porneuo); **harlotry (including adultery and incest)**; figurative **idolatry** :- fornication; **any sexual sin**.

So this the council considered important enough to include in the "essentials," even as they were removing the strictures of the Law as propounded by the Judaizers. And once again we ask the important question, Why?

Every one of us has his or her idea of what is "normal." Every marriage has its own normal. For example, the life Linda and I enjoy at our home—that which we consider normal—is a far cry from that which is normal in the homes of, say, Pastor Jeremy and Serena, or Pastor Daniel and Aimee [\[each with four young children\]](#). Likewise, in the first century a new convert to Christianity who had been born and raised in Jerusalem as a Jew would have a far different idea of "normal" from a convert who had been born and raised in, say, Athens, or Corinth. Today we might draw the comparison between someone born and raised a Baptist in the Midwest to someone born and raised without any faith at all on the Strip in Las Vegas. Two polar-opposites when it comes to what is normal.

The church fathers knew that many new to faith in Christ would have a very different idea of that which is normal—pagan idolatry, multiple deities and, not least, not just sexual promiscuity, but promiscuous sex even being incorporated into temple worship.

Robertson: Pagan religion did not demand sexual purity of its devotees, the gods and goddesses being grossly immoral. Priestesses were in the temples for the service of the men who came.

Demosthenes: We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the faithful guardianship of our homes.

So it was necessary for the church fathers to spell out, explicitly as a rule, that this sort of libidinous behavior was not permitted.

[Back to Thessalonians.](#)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5.

v3

Paul states explicitly in v3 that God's desire for their lives was sanctification—holiness, purity—and especially in regards to their sexual life. And in v4 he defines what he means by this.

v4

And, in v4, here we go again: *no one* agrees on just what is meant by this verse.

that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor

The disagreement centers on what Paul means by two words in this verse: in the NASB the words translated "possess" and "vessel."

possess^{nasb, kjvs}, **control**^{niv, esv} = *ptaomai* = a primary verb; **to get, i.e. acquire** (by any means; own) :- obtain, possess, provide, purchase.

vessel^{nasb, kjvs}, **body**^{niv, esv} = *skeuos* = of uncertain affinity; a **vessel, implement, equipment or apparatus** (literal or figurative [specially a **wife** as contributing to the usefulness of the husband]) :- goods, sail, stuff, vessel. [The NASB "vessel" is the most literal translation, but doesn't help us to know what Paul meant by the word, since vessel could mean any everyday object, like a jug or bowl, one's own body, or a wife.]

To illustrate the disparity, here is an abridged list of the various interpretations from different commentators (*not* Scripture translations):

- possess his own body (i.e., take responsibility for)
- control his own body
- acquire his own wife (i.e., get, obtain)
- possess his own wife
- have his own wife (i.e., live with)

Deepening the challenge is the fact that the different interpretations are about evenly split—for example, between "possess" and "control," and "body" and "wife"—making it all the more difficult for the layman to decide which is correct. But there is the consolation that we can learn truth and draw application from *all* the variants. So let's consider a few of them.

Considering the times in which this letter was written, it is understandable that this counsel is directed toward the male of the species—the man, the husband. But it does no violence to the text to apply these truths today to both sexes. Even with the physical and psychological differences between the two, both struggle against temptation that would lead them *away* from "sanctification and honor."

Sidebar: This was illustrated for me even as I was preparing the notes on this page. As is my habit, when I first sit down at my desk in the morning, I make a quick check of the headlines just to make sure the world hasn't ended overnight and they forgot to tell me. I clicked on two headlines that seemed interesting to me:

"LIFE on Jupiter Moon? NASA to Announce 'Surprising Activity'"
and
"SCANNING SOFTWARE DECIPHERS ANCIENT BIBLICAL SCROLL"

Both articles were interesting, but on both web pages there were large, illustrated links encouraging me to click on them to watch videos of accidental "wardrobe malfunctions" of TV weather girls or news anchors. Even reading a story about signs of life on the Jupiter moon Europa, or how technology is confirming the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible, we are tempted away from a life of holiness.

possess his own body
control his own body (NIV, ESV)

This interpretation is well-supported by other passages, including what Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:18-20.

David, in 1 Samuel 21, refers to the male body as a vessel.

Read 1 Samuel 21:4-5. (NOT NIV)

So the call here is for us to exert control over our own body—which is, after all not just "the vessel of our soul," but "a temple of the Holy Spirit."

acquire his own wife (i.e., get, obtain)
possess his own wife
have his own wife (i.e., live with)

Some interpreters say this verse speaks not just of personal purity, but personal purity within marriage. That is, individual purity is *accomplished or sustained* because of a man holding to his wife, a woman holding to her husband.

And I can see this interpretation—especially because of how this ends, that we are to do this in "sanctification and honor." I don't know about you, but it is a stretch for me to "control my own body *in honor*."

honor = *time* (tee-may') = from <G5099> (tino); **a value**, i.e. money paid, or (concretely and collective) valuables; by analogy **esteem (especially of the highest degree), or the dignity itself** :- honour, precious, price, some.

In a way that can be made to work if we are speaking of our own body, but the sense is easier to apply to the idea of holding my *wife* in purity and honor. And that is what the apostle Peter speaks of in his first epistle.

Read 1 Peter 3:7. (KJVs or ESV)

Another way to think of the end of v4 is that these two words—sanctification (holiness) and honor—describe a healthy marriage with the correct balance: "holiness due God, and honor due the wife." (Lightfoot)

If we back off and look at it broadly, this view of v4 paints a picture of a man and woman coming together in the Lord as husband and wife, not just for mutual satisfaction, but for mutual protection against the temptations of impurity—"sexual immorality." It is a picture of mutual respect, of submission and honor, belonging to each other solely. Paul sums this up neatly in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:2-4.

v5

This is a picture in marked contrast to v5, which brings us back full-circle.

Read vv4-5.

It was *necessary* for Paul to give this command to the Thessalonian church because so many of them had come out of a culture with a radically different norm where it came to sex and marriage. His reason for emphasizing this to them was so they would not just *leave* that pagan culture, but never return to it.

For us, while we may not have come out of a culture like that, we are daily tempted to join it. Paul's injunction is for the purity of the union between man and woman in and through marriage—which is a picture of the purity of the church, the bride of Christ, in union with her Lord.

Read Revelation 19:7-8.

SESSION 19: GO NO FURTHER!

1 Thessalonians 4:6-8

PREFACE

No one in this class in our church would be surprised to learn that at the end of our drive, at the entrance to our property, there is a sign that reads, “No Hunting.” Years ago I expanded on this, painting my own sign that read, “Wildlife refuge. No hunters allowed. Please brake for rabbits.” But that sign eventually weathered away.

The sign at the end of our drive (and, indeed, posted elsewhere around the perimeter of our land) makes it clear that if your intention is to kill animals for sport, you are not welcome. And this order I defend passionately; I have learned that when my dander is up I have no innate fear of men carrying shotguns—nor am I a respecter of persons. [One day our beloved pastor was there with someone else to pick up a load of firewood. They both remarked at the stretch of timber, and asked if we had deer. I assured them we did, in abundance. Pastor, in jest, offered his services to protect us from them, the deer. I, quite seriously replied, “No, I will be the one protecting them from you.”]

In v6 of our text—which begins in the middle of a sentence—Paul uses a word and phrase not found elsewhere in the NT, which would literally translate, “not to go beyond.” We see this in the KJV: “That no man go beyond...”—only here it is not talking about men with shotguns disregarding a “No Hunting” sign, but men stepping over the line, going somewhere they shouldn’t, in regards to “sanctification and honor.”

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:6.

Verses 3-5 address the importance of sexual purity within the marriage; verses 6-8 address the importance of not “going beyond” your own marriage, not stepping over the line and into someone else’s.

v6

Some commentators are of the opinion that with v6 Paul changes topics, referring to general business dealings. And that case can be made. But, for one thing, if that were the case, the word translated “matter” would be plural. The KJV “any matter” is a poor insertion. The Greek is “the matter,” and the NKJV and ESV explicitly connect it to the topic of vv4-5 with “this matter”—that is, the matter at hand, what I have been talking about.

Sidebar: I learned a new word this week, and I will happily share it with you. That word is *asyndeton*, which means “the practice of leaving out the usual conjunctions between coordinate sentence elements”—e.g., and. Look at the break between v5 and v6: In the better translations, v5 ends with a semicolon, followed by “that no...” That is, the “and” inserted by the NASB and NIV is not in the Greek. Thus the sentence uses an asyndeton: two items connected without an “and.”

So v6 is a continuation of the sentence that begins in v3. If we were to look at it in just the big chunks, it would be,
 v3: God wants you to be sexually moral,
 v4: by controlling your own body, and honoring the body of your spouse,
 v5: not with the unbridled, out-of-control lust of those without God;
 v6: part of this is that such sanctification also honors the life of your brother.

If this pertained to business dealings, we can easily understand the injunction against transgressing and defrauding a brother. Greed carried to the point of dishonesty and fraud is commonplace, and God’s commands against this are strewn throughout His word. But you may be questioning how sexual sin “defrauds” a brother.

Recall what we read in our last session, what Paul wrote to the Corinthians regarding marriage, including v4:

The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. (1 Corinthians 7:4)

This is the picture of mutual *ownership* in a marriage. And this NT concept is an expansion of what Moses wrote in the Pentateuch.

Read Leviticus 18:16.

There the Lord makes it clear that when you have illicit relations with, for example, your sister-in-law, you are “transgressing and defrauding your brother,” as Paul writes to the Thessalonians. [Look also at Chapter 20.](#)

Read Leviticus 20:20-21.

This shows divine judgment coming down on those who have trespassed—“gone beyond” where they should—into someone else’s marriage and defrauded the spouse.

David Guzik: When we are sexually immoral, we take advantage of and defraud others and we cheat them in greater ways than we can imagine. The adulterer defrauds his mate and children. The fornicator defrauds his future mate and children, and both defraud their illicit partner.

Repeatedly in Leviticus 18 the idea is given that one may not uncover the nakedness of another not their spouse. The idea is that the nakedness of an individual belongs to their spouse and no one else, and it is a violation of God’s law to give that nakedness to anyone else, or for anyone else to take it.

And Leon Morris speaks to the impact of this *before* marriage.

Adultery is an obvious violation of the rights of another. But promiscuity before marriage represents the robbing of the other that virginity which ought to be brought to a marriage. The future partner of such a one has been defrauded.

So far we have come at this mostly from a *moral* perspective: it is just wrong, and an offense against a brother or sister in Christ. But there is also a judicial perspective; Paul had warned the Thessalonians of this earlier, when he was with them, and he reminds them now:

because the Lord is the avenger in all these things,

1. Divine Vengeance

From the second half of v6 through v8 Paul lays out four reasons for sexual purity (Guzik), and the first is that the offender will not escape the judgment of the Lord. There certainly can be immediate, temporal consequences to this behavior, but our passage refers to the day when each of us will stand before the *bema* of Christ. If the world blithely dismisses such things, be assured that the Lord will not. The word Paul uses is a strong, serious word:

avenger = *ekdikos* (ek'-deek-os) = from <G1537> (ek) and <G1349> (dike); **carrying justice out, i.e. a punisher** :- a (re-) venger.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 with comments.

Throughout our life we build on the foundation of Christ. Sometimes we build with precious, substantial materials—

- good works performed in the Lord’s name;
- sacrificial giving to others;
- growing in Christ, rather than growing in the things of this world;

—and sometimes we build with cheap, insubstantial materials:

- good works performed for our own self-aggrandizement;
- hoarding our wealth;
- remaining a child in the things of God, while deepening our relationship with this world.

On the day we stand before the throne, the latter will be consumed in the fire of holy judgment—it will all have been for naught—while the former will be used to construct our crown, as it were. No matter the balance, no matter who we are in the eyes of man, we *all* will stand there to have our deeds judged. The apostle John confirms this in the Revelation.

Read Revelation 20:12-15.

Those who are not in Christ, whose names are not in His book of life will not have their deeds judged; they failed at the one thing that counted: faith in Christ. Thus they will be immediately consigned to hell. But those whose names *are* in the book will be “judged...according to their deeds.” Based on the importance God places on sexual purity in His word, on how He uses this to illustrate our fidelity to Him [e.g., Ezekiel 16:30-43] it should be of utmost importance to *us*.

2. Our Call

We find the second reason in v7. It is our calling.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:7. (NOT NIV or KJV)

This verse is a perfect illustration of the importance of having more than one translation at your disposal. As we have seen recently, the NIV can get it right, even at times rising to the top. But here the NIV drops the ball, with “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. In v7 the prepositions make all the difference, and the NIV uses the same for each (“to”), when they are not. [The KJV does the same, but employs a marginally more agreeable “unto”]

God has indeed *not* called us *to* (or “for” in the NASB) impurity, but—and here we would expect how the NIV translates it, an equivalency with another “to.” But these are not equivalent: God has called us to *dwell in the sphere of holiness*.

For the last eight years, every time someone does something that President Obama doesn’t like, he has, with nauseating regularity, said something like, “That’s not who we are.” What he really means is, *That’s not who I think we should be*, but that’s a topic for another day. The point is this: Paul intentionally switches prepositions from one that means aim or intention [*epi*: *to, or better, for the purpose of*] to one that means in the state or sphere of [*en*] to emphasize the all-encompassing environment in which we dwell when we are “*in Christ*.” It is, as Obama would put it, *who we are*. When we are in Christ, sanctification is our natural environment: we dwell *in* it, we swim in it, we are enveloped in it.

Why is this distinction important? Why does Paul choose *en* instead of repeating *epi*? Because he wants the Thessalonians, and us, to understand what an offense sexual impurity is to our “natural” state in Christ. It’s not who we are. He is pointing out that we do not just *strive* for holiness as an intention; as Christians we *dwell* in holiness.

3: A Rejection of God

Verse 8 gives us the third reason for Paul’s command, and is the logical implication of v7.

Read v8.

If, in impurity, we rebel against our “natural” state in Christ, we are essentially rebelling against God Himself—we are rejecting God. And here it is the ESV that has it a little soft with “disregards.” It is a stronger word than that; the KJV translates the word “despiseth.”

reject = *atheteo* = from a compound of <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and a derivative of <G5087> (tithemi); **to set aside**, i.e. (by implication) to disesteem, neutralize or violate :- **cast off, despise, disannul, frustrate, bring to nought, reject**.

Guzik: Despite the petty ways many rationalize sexual immorality, we still reject God when we sin in this way. Paul’s strong command here did not seem to come because the Thessalonians were deep in sin. No specific sin is mentioned; it seems that this was meant to prevent sin rather than to rebuke sin, in light of the prevailing low standards in their society and because of the seductive strength of sexual immorality.

4: The Holy Spirit

The end of v8 gives us the final reason for sexual purity—but at the same time it is our strongest ally against the temptation that would pull us away from it: The indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives us the power, the support, the *resolve* to withstand temptations of the flesh; without Him we would be far more vulnerable.

At the same time, He is one of our best motivating reasons not to give in. ***The Spirit is God living in us!*** What an egregious offense it must be against Him, when we let our earthly temples to be used in this way. The Spirit is not an “it”; the Spirit is a “He.” He is as much a “person” to us as the other two members of the Godhead. And when we do this to our bodies, we are doing it to *Him*!

So let us close with Paul’s eloquent treatment of this to the Corinthian church—where we know there were, indeed, problems with sexual purity.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:15-20.

SESSION 20: BEHAVIOR INSIDE AND OUT

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

PREFACE

One word—the word that begins v13 in most of our translations (except for NIV)—sent me in search of a way to tie together vv9-12, and vv13-18 in this second half of the fourth chapter. That word in the Greek is *de*, which is translated “But,” which can also mean “and,” “now” (NIV), “moreover,” “therefore,” etc. Since he included this word *de*—and most versions translate this as “but”—how and why, I wondered, does Paul transition from brotherly love in vv9-10 to the redeemed dead in v13? It is indeed a different topic, but since he stuck in a “but,” how does he connect the two?

What I came up with is encapsulated in the outline in the handout—which covers the text from v9 to v18 (so is applicable to the next two sessions).

[\[see handout\]](#)

vv9-10

In our passage today we once again have Paul both affirming the obedience of the Thessalonians—and encouraging them to “excel still more.” He did this earlier in this chapter regarding how they should “walk and please God.”

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1.

And now Paul does the same thing regarding brotherly love.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10.

Brotherly love [\[philadelphia\]](#), as adopted by the Christian church, describes the horizontal love believers have for one another. It traces back to *adelphos*, which is the word translated “brethren” in v1 of this chapter. This is a wonderfully descriptive term which means, literally, “from the same womb” and was adopted from the more literal secular speech by the early church fathers to describe the unique familial bond that exists in the church. Every believer is *in* Christ; every believer has the Holy Spirit within them. So we are so closely related, we could have come from the same womb. In fact, it has been my experience that at times our brothers and sisters in Christ can be *closer* than our blood kin.

Paul has already given evidence, earlier in this letter, that the Thessalonians require no lengthy admonition regarding the expression of brotherly love. They have already been demonstrating such love throughout the Macedonian region, and Paul has been hearing about it.

Sidebar: While it seems clear in this context that Paul refers here to love of the *Christian* brethren, the case could be made that he perhaps casts a wider net. Throughout the NT love of *adelphos* can refer to brothers and sisters in Christ, our neighbors, and even our enemies.

A note about the verb in the second part of v9

Both the NIV and ESV have “for you yourselves **have been** taught by God,” which would seem to refer back to Paul’s teaching of them while he was in their midst.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

“Have been” implies that this happened before—i.e., via the teaching of Paul—but may not be continuing (since he is now absent from them). The better verb here is “are,” as in “for you yourselves **are** taught by God to love one another.” This teaching is *continual* for all believers.

Lange: ...not merely, that is, historically, out of God’s word in the Old Testament, or from Jesus’ commandment of love (John 13), or through the prophets among you (1Th 5:20), but inwardly through the Holy Ghost (1Th 4:8).

Robert L. Thomas: At conversion, believers become lifelong pupils as the Spirit bears inner witness to the love within the Christian family. No external stimulus is necessary. Mutual love among Christians is an inbred quality.

How important is this? How important is this that we not just demonstrate but nurture this quality in our Christian walk? Answer: It is so important that Jesus *commands* us to do it.

Read John 13:33-35.

When Jesus returned to the Father, He left us not only the Holy Spirit, but each other—and we are to love each other as Jesus loves us. Beyond the benefit *within* His kingdom—mutual encouragement and affirmation—there is the external benefit that this behavior *identifies* those in His kingdom to those without.

What does this look like? How far are we to go with this brotherly love? Answer: We are to outdo each other in living out this commandment.

I am currently reading a biography of Julius Caesar by Philip Freeman. And in the book he quotes from an epitaph a Roman man wrote for his departed wife:

*I competed with you, my dear,
in devotion, virtue, frugality, and love—
but I always lost.
I wish everyone the same fate.*

That is how we are to love each other.

Read Romans 12:9-13.

The phrase “give preference,” or “preferring one another” can also mean “*outdo one another in showing honor.*” We love each other by always placing the other person before ourselves; the good of the other is to always take precedence.

w11-12

In the next two verses Paul counsels the Thessalonians further regarding their witness to those outside the family of Christ. Not only are they to love each other in an extraordinary way, they are to show themselves as hard-working, responsible individuals. [Verse 11 is a continuation of the sentence that begins in the second half of v10.](#)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:10b-12 in NASB, NKJV or ESV.

The evidence seems to indicate that, unlike Paul’s admonition regarding brotherly love, this admonition spoke to a failing on the part of some in Thessalonica. Note in v11: “just as we commanded you.” There seemed to be a problem of discipline in the Thessalonian church, one he addressed with greater fervency and detail in his second letter to them.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12.

and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life

What does a quiet life look like? Paul isn’t speaking of decibels or volume, but of a life of decency, dignity and humility.

Read Colossians 3:12-13.

Read Romans 12:16-18.

And remember what Jesus said about this in Luke 14:

And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this man,’ and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 14:7-11)

There are any number of ways this can be applied to the life of a believer. A few that occur to me are

- be respectful of others
- don’t always be the first to speak
- listen to and consider the opinions of others
- leave time for meditation and contemplation (especially of God’s word)

attend to your own business and work with your hands ... as we commanded you,

There is an attractive, yet dangerous pitfall built into our service in the name of Christ—aka, “ministry.” When one participates in any endeavor that accepts, even *invites* support from others, one is tempted to rest in that external support, and not carry one’s own weight. Whether from laziness or, as might have been the case in Thessalonica, anticipation of the soon return of the Lord, we are not to be dependent on others.

Paul did not stop at commanding against this sort of behavior; he *modeled* it.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9.

attend to your own business

“Attend to your own business” does not just refer to labor, but includes the idea not to be busybodies, preoccupied with the lives of others. The two go hand in hand: idleness breeds mischief, whereas hard work leaves little time for idle gossip. This is not in conflict with the idea of brotherly love.

(F. F.) Bruce: There is a great difference between the Christian duty of putting the interests of others first and the busybody’s compulsive itch to put other people right.

...so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need (or be dependent on no one).

Notice how the *sphere* of this behavior is not sharply delimited: we are not to behave one way in the church, and another way in the world.

- Verses 9-10 speak of “brotherly love,” and even if we restrict this to brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus told us that this will be noticed, and have an effect on those *outside* the church.
- Verses 11-12 speak more to our daily life in the world, our interactions with people *not* in our spiritual family—but not exclusive to that. Within the family we are to have these character traits, and, once again, if we do, this speaks well of those who are in Christ to those without.

Both of these admonitions—brotherly love and industry—speak both to family life within the body of Christ, and to our witness to those outside the family.

CORRECTION

In part of **Session 15, our study of 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10**, I explained Paul's extraordinary concern—even fear—for the well-being of the Thessalonian church on the lack of evidence that that brand new church had any in-place leaders. No pastor, deacons, elders, etc. But this week I found some evidence I had missed before, so I need to make some adjustment to what I said at the time.

Near the end of this letter, in Chapter Five, Paul writes,

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction,

and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

(1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a)

So even though it *was* a very young church, and because of this Paul still had reason to fear for their integrity, it would seem that there were indeed at least some resident leaders in-place.

SESSION 21: THE EXPECTANT SLEEP

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

PREFACE

Two headlines at the conservative web site, *The Patriot Post*, this week illustrate the appalling level of ignorance in our society—in this case, Millennials (those roughly in their twenties to mid-thirties).

“32% of Millennials Think [George W.] Bush Killed More People Than Stalin”

and

“Millennials Pretty Cool With Socialism”

The root of this ignorance is, of course, the deplorable, politically correct education these poor souls have received. They are woefully ignorant of historical facts because they have been raised on a pack of lies—or essential facts have just been eliminated from their curriculum.

We often cite Hitler as the poster-boy for atrocities, but he couldn’t hold a candle to Joseph Stalin, who was responsible—through intentional famine, forced relocation and political purges—for the death of tens of millions of his own people. And since the left has always had a fascination with socialism and communism, and since the left has been in charge of our education system for many decades, it is not surprising that this generation would be just fine with a dictator and government taking care of their every need as it rules over every aspect of their lives.

The Thessalonians, too, were ignorant about a few things. In our previous session we saw that they needed to be taught the facts of life—again—about “working with their own hands” (4:11) and taking responsibility for their own lives. In *this* session we have the apostle Paul addressing something else of which this church was ignorant: the systematic order of the last days.

vv13

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14.

Note: “uninformed” or “ignorant” is not necessarily synonymous with “stupid.” It has little to do with an inability to learn, but speaks more of a lack of knowledge.

uninformed, ignorant = *agnoeo* = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and <G3539> (noieo); **not to know (through lack of information or intelligence)**; by implication to ignore (through disinclination) :- (be) ignorant (-ly), not know, not understand, unknown.

The Thessalonians simply did not know or understand the finer points of the *parousia*—the “presence” of and final judgment of Christ at His return. I dare say that none of us can throw stones at the Thessalonians on this topic; many of us as well are woefully ignorant of the details of this dramatic, literally cataclysmic series of events.

In his *first* epistle to this church, Paul mostly speaks about the coming of the Lord to call his people home to heaven. This is but the beginning, the first moment of the *parousia*—“the day of the Lord.” In his *second* epistle he broadens the discussion to include the judgment of Christ that will follow. And Paul’s purpose in both letters is to inform the uninformed, to set them straight with the facts.

“Asleep”

Let us pause for a moment on this word “asleep.” It is too thin to just conclude it is a polite euphemism for death. The finality of physical death is an *earthly* concept; from heaven’s perspective *all* things—at least pertaining to people—are eternal. Even those who are destined to suffer what God calls the “second death” will not ever sink into oblivion, or lose consciousness.

Read Matthew 25:41,46.

There is no such thing as the earthly concept of death being nothingness—the absence of consciousness. The soul—for believers and unbelievers alike—is eternal and ever-conscious. The earthly grave does not hold the soul: the souls of believers go immediately into the presence of the Lord, while the souls of unbelievers go immediately into eternal punishment. For both, the *body* is simply “asleep,” awaiting its eventual wake-up call: resurrection.

Grief vs. Hope

It is possible, perhaps likely, that these two areas of “ignorance” that Paul addresses in this letter—working to support themselves, and the status of the dead in Christ—stem from the same root. The apostle probably spoke to them of Christ’s return, and it is possible they construed from this that His return was so imminent that they need not concern themselves with work, wages, food, or the future in general. In the meantime, however, they worried about those who died prior to Christ’s return. Would those Christians miss out? Alexander Maclaren summarizes it nicely for us:

Some of the Thessalonians seem to have been troubled, not by questions about the Resurrection, as the Corinthians afterwards were, but by a curious difficulty, namely, whether the dead saints would not be worse off at Christ’s coming than the living, and to that one point Paul addresses himself. These verses are not a general revelation of the course of events at that coming, or of the final condition of the glorified saints, but an answer to the question, What is the relation between the two halves of the Church, the dead and the living, in regard to their participation in Christ’s glory when He comes again?

so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.

grieve, sorrow^{kjvs} = *lypeo* = from <G3077> (lupe); **to distress**; reflexive or passive to be sad :- cause grief, grieve, **be in heaviness**, (be) sorrow (-ful), be (make) sorry.

Note that small, but important, clarifying word “as”. Paul is not saying that Christians do not, or are not to experience sorrow at the passing of a loved one. But we do not, or are not to grieve *as do those without Christ*.

Believers have no reason to grieve for a fellow believer who is now in “Paradise” (Luke 23:43) with Christ Jesus. We only feel sorrow for ourselves, over the loss of a loved one. Paul spoke of this personally, regarding what he might have experienced if the Lord had not shown mercy on his brother Epaphroditus.

Read Philippians 2:25-27.

A common remark in this world, following any complaint about old age or the accompanying infirmities of that condition is, “But it’s better than the alternative”—meaning, death. But of course that is not true for the Christian.

In the film version of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, the wizard Gandolf and the hobbit Pippin are huddled together as the enemy forces are about to breach their last defense. Their doom seems certain. The diminutive hobbit, fearing death is near, says to Gandolf,

“I didn’t think it would end this way.”

“End?” Gandolf replies. “No, the journey doesn’t end here. Death is just another path—one that we all must take. The gray rain curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to soothing glass. And then you see it.”

“What, Gandolf? See what?” Pippin asks.

“White shores, and beyond, a far green country, into a swift sunrise.”

“Well, that isn’t so bad.”

“No. No, it isn’t.”

Christians are in possession of something alien to this world: hope. Not, of course hope as a wish, but hope as confident, assured expectation.

v14

Paul is taking a gradual approach to answering the essential question, as Maclaren put it, *What is the relation between the two halves of the Church, the dead and the living, in regard to their participation in Christ’s glory when He comes again?*

- In v13 he speaks of death itself.
- In v14 he assures them of the general principle that those in the grave *will* experience not just the resurrection, but will return with Christ, same as those who are not “asleep.”
- Finally, in v15 Paul answers the specific question in the negative,
- and in vv16-17 he answers it, in detail, positively.

Read v14. (“if” = since this is the case)

This is the basis and proof of our hope: the historic resurrection of Jesus. Even the ancient Job prophesied that he knew he would one day stand before God *in the flesh*, because he had a Redeemer who had once lived, lived now in heaven, and would bodily come again to earth.

“As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,
And at the last He will take His stand on the earth.
Even after my skin is destroyed,
Yet from my flesh I shall see God;
Whom I myself shall behold,
And whom my eyes will see and not another.
My heart faints within me!”
(Job 19:25-27)

Robert L. Thomas points out something we shouldn’t miss in the text. Notice that while Paul repeatedly refers to Christian death as “sleep” in this passage, he does not do the same when referring to what Christ experienced.

Jesus did not sleep; He died. Jesus suffered literal separation from God the Father as a result of bearing our sins. There is no better definition for true death than that. “Because of His real death, Christian death has been transformed into sleep (Milligan).”

even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

Notice, too, how Paul finishes this verse. We might expect him to write ...*Jesus died and rose again, even so God will raise us...* This is how the apostle put it to the Corinthians in his second letter to them.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:13-14

But here he says it differently—for a reason.

...Jesus died and rose again, even so **God will bring with Him** those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. (emphasis added)

Our ultimate hope is not just to be raised from the grave. What if that was the end of the promise? What if Christian salvation meant just salvation *from the grave*? What would we have gained from that! To be brought back to life to just continue on living as we had before? No thank you.

The promise from God is that if we are in His Son—if our body *enters* the grave belonging to Christ—it will one day be raised *from* the grave to live with Him and the Father for all eternity. That is our hope; that is *real* salvation, as Jesus put it so eloquently in John’s gospel. We can read this familiar passage now in a new light because of the Thessalonian letters.

Read John 14:1-6.

no one comes to the Father but through Me.

Doesn’t that last clause take on extra meaning in light of our passage in Thessalonians. We typically think of John 14:6 to mean that the only way to the Father is through *faith* in Christ—which is perfectly true. But it also means that in the day of resurrection, when Christ returns, the way upward to the Father for saints living and “asleep” will be *through Christ*. He will come to personally conduct us into the presence of our heavenly Father.

I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:3b)

Let's close with what Charles Haddon Spurgeon said about this passage.

...sleep is a suspension of the faculties, but not a destruction of the body. When we see anyone naturally asleep, we believe that body will wake up again. We do not suppose that those eyes will be sealed up in perpetual darkness, that those bones and that flesh will lie dormant, never more to feel the consciousness of being, or stir with the impulse of life. No, we expect to see the functions of life resumed, the eyelids open to admit the cheering rays of light and the limbs to become again exercised with activity. So, when we bury our dead in their graves, we are taught to believe that they are asleep. Our faith, (which is warranted by the Word of God), discerns in the corruption of death a suspension of the powers of the body rather than an annihilation of the matter itself. The earthly house of this tabernacle must be dissolved, but it cannot be destroyed. Though the bones are scattered to the four winds of Heaven, yet at the call of the Lord God, they shall come together again, bone to bone. Though the eyes are first glazed and then devoured from their sockets, they shall be surely restored—that each saint in his own flesh may see God! In this confidence we deposit the body of each departed saint in the grave as in a bed. We doubt not that God will guard the dust of the precious sons and daughters of Zion. We believe that in the Resurrection there shall be a perfect identity of the body. You may call it unphilosophical if you please, but you cannot show me that it is unbiblical! Science cannot demonstrate it, you say. But then science cannot disprove it. Reason stands abashed while Revelation lifts her trumpet-tongue and exclaims, “Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.”

Once more, there is a very precious word in connection with this sleep which we must not overlook. At the 14th verse it says that they “sleep in Jesus.” Sweet thought! This teaches us that death does not dissolve the union which subsists between the Believer and Christ. When the body dies, it does not cease to be a part of Christ! “Know you not that your bodies are the members of Christ?” said the Apostle to those who were still living in the world. And now, as to those whose earthly course is done, our departed friends “sleep in Jesus”—they are as much in Christ now as they were when upon earth! And their bodies, which were precious to the Lord and preserved as the apple of His eye, are as precious to Him now as they ever were! (from his sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:13)

SESSION 22: A “DIFFERENT” MESSIAH

1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

PREFACE

It is ironic that when the day finally arrives when the Messiah fulfills the role imagined and expected by Israel, so few of them will be able to experience or even witness it. In their study of the Scriptures, ancient Israel did not see the Messiah as the Suffering Servant—only as an all-powerful, no-nonsense ruler. Their picture of the Messiah was defined by passages such as Psalm 2:9—

You shall break them with a rod of iron,
You shall shatter them like earthenware.

—not passages such as Zechariah 9:9, where He is pictured in humility and gentleness.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
He is just and endowed with salvation,
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Because He did not come in power and might the first time, they rejected Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. But as we discovered in our study of Christ in the Old Testament, Jesus was and is the only one who fulfilled every prophecy of the Messiah. He first had to come as the Suffering Servant, the gentle and sacrificial Lamb of God. Then He would return in triumph, as King and Ruler—and Judge. In the passage before us, we see the very beginning moments of His triumphant return. The curtain is just opening on the climactic third and final act. But even now, even in the very first seconds—as Paul writes to the Corinthians, “in the twinkling of an eye”—of this final act, Jesus the Messiah is already fulfilling His role as Judge.

In our last session Paul reassured the Thessalonian church that because Jesus “died and rose again,” those who “have fallen asleep in Jesus”—that is, Christians who died prior to His return—will indeed share in Christ’s coming to take the church home with Him. In this session we flesh out the events of this dramatic moment.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

v15

For this we say to you by/in the/a word of the Lord,

Although Jesus did speak of the resurrection of His followers (e.g., Matthew 24:31, Luke 14:14), we have no recorded words of His that give the details Paul does in v15. The word translated “by” is the familiar *en*, which can also mean “in the sphere of.” Probably what Paul means here is that he passes along these details under inspiration—thus the NIV could be misleading with, “According to the Lord’s own word.” This is not his opinion or conjecture, but the authoritative word of the Lord.

Kyrios

Note the repeated use of *kyrios*, “Lord,” in this passage. In vv13-14 Paul refers to Him as “Jesus.” Though he refers to Him as “Christ” in v16, I find it significant that five times in vv15-18 Paul refers to Him as Lord. Naturally, I wondered, Why?

kyrios = from *kuros* (supremacy); **supreme in authority**, i.e. (noun) controller; by implication Mr. (as a respectful title) :- God, Lord, master, Sir.

I could find no commentator who chose to discuss this, so I do not want to assign any dramatic importance to Paul’s repeated use of *kyrios* in these verses. Nevertheless, any time Scripture emphasizes one word over another, or suddenly switches from one term to another, it should cause us to pay attention and look for a reason. Words mean things—especially in God’s word—and He does not waste them.

As the apostle himself would put it, “I say, not the Lord,” (i.e., **this is just my own supposition**) that Paul has a reason for his use of *kyrios*. When describing to the church this long-awaited, mind-blowing event he wants to emphasize precisely the *lordship* of Christ. No more the humble, suffering servant; no more the sacrificial lamb—Christ now comes with His full measure of power and majesty. For Jews who knew, or knew of the Messiah during His first time among us, this will be someone dramatically “different.” This will be the Messiah in full-flower, as it were: the reigning King, the ultimate Judge, supreme in authority, *Lord*!

that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

First Paul states his point in the negative (“will not”): Those who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet Him first; first in line will be those who had previously died “in Jesus”.

The Series of Events in the End Times

Before we proceed we need to take a moment to get our bearings—to back off and look at the forest before we examine each tree. There is a multitude of positions, interpretations of Scripture regarding the end times. In this study we will not take the time to examine each one—it is beyond the scope of this class to debate the merits and errors of the various positions—but it is important that we pick one.

Our church’s official position, stated in our *Articles of Faith*, is “pretribulational premillennialism”—or “dispensational premillennialism” (which acknowledges Israel as distinct from the church). Our *Articles of Faith* spells out the details and Scripture references to substantiate this position, but let me break it down to the essentials. In order,

1. Jesus returns to remove His church (but does *not* touch down to earth).
2. This is followed by the seven-year Tribulation.
3. Then Jesus returns to earth (His “second coming”).
4. There follows a one-thousand-year period with Christ reigning and Israel exalted (Christ’s millennial reign).
5. Finally, a new heaven and new earth are established, Satan is defeated, and believers now in eternal state.

v16

After Paul makes his point in the negative in v15, he then, in greater detail, states his point in the positive in v16.

Read v16.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God,

Read Isaiah 42:1-2.

In the very first split second of Christ’s return He announces that He is no longer the gentle, humble Messiah of before. He is *Lord*, and now He issues commands that must be obeyed. And His first command is that the graves of the redeemed be emptied.

Sidebar: I want to make sure I am understood. This is presented from a *human* perspective. I am not at all suggesting that the essential Son of God has literally changed from one thing to another, that His personality has undergone a transformation. From a human perspective this is a very different Messiah; from the perspective of heaven, how He presents Himself now to humanity is what He has been all long. When, on earth, He was revealing Himself as the suffering Servant, He was also King. In the end times, when He reveals Himself as reigning King and Judge, He remains the gentle, giving Savior.

And speaking of human perspective, let us not force this supernatural event into the earthly rules of physics. God plays by His own rules, and is under no obligation to fit His ways into our understanding.

Some have used this verse to be critical of the position that the rapture will be something that is relatively “secret”—that is, in contrast to when Christ comes back to earth itself for the Millennium, and the whole world will witness Him, during the rapture Christ remains at some lofty place between heaven and earth, and deals only with the redeemed. They posit that with these three audible signals—the Lord’s shout, the voice of the archangel, the trumpet call—the entire world will know what is going on.

But who among us can say what this will sound like?

a **shout** = *keleusma* = from <G2753> (keleuo); a cry of incitement; a shout of command.

voice of the archangel = *phone* = a tone (articulate, bestial or artificial); by implication an address (for any purpose), saying or language :- noise, sound, voice.

the **trumpet** of God = *salpinx* = perhaps from <G4535> (salos) (through the idea of quavering or reverberation); a trumpet :- trump (-et).

Will these sounds be in sequence, one after the other, or all at once? Do you know what the voice of an archangel sounds like? Do you know what the trumpet of God sounds like? How will three heavenly sounds, whether distinct from one another or in unison, sound to earthly, human ears?

The sound of a lightning strike ten-miles distant can be an extended, rolling rumble, almost pleasant to the ears.

The sound of a lightning strike outside one’s window is a sharp crack of doom.

A number of years ago, during the tenure of Pastor Gary, a brief video was shown during a Sunday morning service. The video was of the congregation in a typical worship service. Suddenly, without warning, there is an ear-splitting crack, and most of the congregation vanishes “in the twinkling of an eye,” leaving behind a few poor souls who, quickly realizing what has happened, are reduced to miserable sobs.

Perhaps the cry of command from the Lord will be a warm, inviting melody, with harmony contributed by the head angel, the duet accompanied by God’s trumpet. Or it may be the jolting crack of a lightning strike outside one’s bedroom window. David Guzik points out another aspect of this.

David Guzik: It may be all three descriptions (shout, voice, and trumpet) refer to the same sound, or there may be three distinct sounds. The rapture will not be silent or secret, though the vast majority of people may not understand the sound or its meaning.

As to the sound, the unregenerate may hear something, but will probably not know what it is. Paul, on the road to Damascus, sees and hears something different from his companions.

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice [or sound; *phone*, same as in 1 Thessalonians 4:16] saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice [or sound] but seeing no one. Acts 9:3-7 ESV

Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. Acts 22:9 ESV

And speaking of thunder, something similar occurred when God the Father spoke to Jesus.

“Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” John 12:28-29 ESV

So let us not be dogmatic about the specifics of this event—save that,

the dead in Christ will rise first.

The first to answer this heavenly command will be those who have been “asleep in Jesus” (v14). No matter the location of their grave, no matter the physical condition of their remains, these will be the first to join Jesus in the sky.

vv17-18

Then we who are alive and remain...

Some try to make v17 the basis for Paul believing that Christ would return in his lifetime (“we who are alive will”), but I side with the position that Paul was just stating the obvious: since he clearly was not yet dead, he would include himself with those still alive. It was not at all uncommon for believers in the first century to think, to hope that Christ would return in their lifetimes. Don’t we today?

will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,

Those already dead, no matter the condition of their remains, will be raised—as Paul states in 1 Corinthians—“imperishable”: incorruptible, undecaying, immortal.

Keep a finger here and go to 1 Corinthians 15.

Although the difference between the two may not be clear to us now, the dead—those whose bodies have perished—will receive an imperishable body, while those who are still alive at His coming, will receive “changed,” different bodies. Why? Because, as Paul writes in v50,

flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

The holiness and purity of God cannot permit sin or mortality in His presence. Whether dead or alive at Christ’s coming, our eternity requires an eternal, immortal form.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:52-55.

Keep a finger here and go back to Thessalonians.

and so we shall always be with the Lord.

Christians and unbelievers alike commonly speak of “going to heaven,” as if the *place* of our eternity is what is important. But that’s not true; it is not the place, but the *company*. From the rapture on, we will “always be with the Lord.” What makes heaven paradise is not the environment, the climate, the gold-paved streets or accommodations. What makes heaven paradise is that it is the home of the Lord God and His Christ, our Savior.

Back to 1 Corinthians.

Here is how Paul closes this remarkable prophecy.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:56-57.

Back to Thessalonians.

To the Thessalonian church Paul concludes with v18:

Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Our ultimate victory—over sin, over death, over the corruption of the grave—is through our victorious Lord Jesus Christ. Comfort indeed.

SESSION 23: LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

1 Thessalonians 5:1-5a

PREFACE

In our last two sessions—4:13-18—the apostle Paul discussed *what* was going to happen at “the coming of the Lord.” The dead in Christ will rise first, then those who are alive; we all will meet Him in the air, and so (the best news of all) “we shall always be with the Lord.”

Now, as we turn to the fifth and final chapter in this first letter, Paul addresses the *when*—or, more precisely, the fact that *we don’t know* the when.

Let’s take the long view first. The pronouns in the approximate first half of Chapter Five (vv1-11) seem to stand out—marking to whom or about whom Paul is speaking, and drawing a contrast between them. This effectively breaks the passage into six portions. Note first, along with referring to them as “brethren,” his use of “you” four times in vv1-2, as he addresses the church.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2.

Then in v3 he switches to speaking from the perspective of unbelievers, switching the pronouns to “they” or “them” three times.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:3.

In the third portion, Paul returns to describing believers in the church, switching back, in vv4-5a, to “you” three times.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5a.

In vv5b-6, Paul includes himself, changing the pronouns to “we” and “us.”

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:5b-6.

Then in v7 he returns to the unsaved (by implication; admittedly it is true that believers, too, sleep at night—and might even get drunk as well).

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:7.

Finally, in vv8-11, he is back to speaking to and about the redeemed church, with the pronouns “we,” “us,” “our” and “you.”

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:8-11.

v1

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you.

The first thing that strikes me about v1 is how pleasant and affirming it would be to hear this from a pastor or teacher. Replace “the times and the epochs” with a blank, and insert any topic you like; how encouraging it would be to hear the words,

“You don’t need to hear any more about living righteously.”

“You don’t need to hear any more about the holiness of God.”

“You don’t need to hear any more about peace within the church.”

Sadly, but not surprisingly, this is not usually the case. In most instances we all need to hear again—and again—about most any pertinent topic. And I’m amused to discover that Paul is like most teachers: He begins by stating that the Thessalonians don’t need to hear any more about “the times and epochs”—then he proceeds to tell them more! With this remark we understand that Paul had spoken to the church about this topic when he was with them.

times and epochs

times = *chronon* = **a space of time** (in general, and thus properly distinguished from <G2540> (*kairos*), which designates a fixed or special occasion; and from <G165> (*aion*), which denotes a particular period) **or interval**; by extensive an individual opportunity; by implication delay :- + years old, season, space, (× often-) time (-s), (a) while.

epochs, seasons, dates = *kairon* = **an occasion, i.e. set or proper time** :- × always, opportunity, (convenient, due) season, (due, short, while) time, a while. Compare <G5550> (*chronos*).

Jesus Himself employed these two words in some of His final remarks to His disciples.

Read Acts 1:6-7.

Jews and well-taught Christians in the first century, would immediately associate this phrase with eschatological matters: the end times. Here is how Robert L. Thomas describes the difference between the two words.

“Times and dates” are well-known words describing the end times from two perspectives. The former (*chronon*) conceives more of elapsed time and hence a particular date or dates when predictions will be fulfilled. The latter word (*kairon*), while including some reference to extent of time, gives more attention to the character or quality of a given period, i.e., what signs will accompany the consummating events. [Hence the NASB “epochs” and KJVs “seasons,” which emphasize the nature of the period, and why “dates” is a little thin.]

So we might paraphrase this, *as to the precise date and nature of the end times, you have already been well-schooled.*

v2

For you yourselves know full well...

Verses 1 and 2 make me wonder if the apostle Paul knew, even as he was writing these letters to the new churches, that they would be retained for posterity in one form or another. He may not have been so bold as to imagine them included in the canon of Scripture, but he surely knew they would reach an audience well beyond the immediate church or region.

I conclude this because what he is doing in these two verses is a common dramatic device. The character being spoken to already knows the information being expressed by the speaking character, *but the audience doesn’t*. So the speaking character informs the audience by telling the other character—usually prefacing it with something like, “As you already know...” or “Like I told you before...” I think that is what Paul is doing here: he is informing the wider audience.

that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.

By using the phrase “the day of the Lord,” Paul refers to far more than just the initial moment of the Rapture. That phrase is used to refer to and include

- the ultimate overthrow of God’s enemies, which can include the idea of judgment (Isaiah 2:12; 1 Corinthians 4:3 [same word translated “day” in 1 Thessalonians, translated “court”]);
- a day of national deliverance for Israel;

- a day of salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:9);
- the day of God's wrath against His enemies (Isaiah 13:6-11);
- the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:20-21 with Jeremiah 30:7-8);
- Christ's second coming (Revelation 19:11-21).

So "the day of the Lord" is *initiated* at a moment in time known to no one but God the Father (Matthew 24:36-41), but, depending on context, can include the entire end-times process—not a 24-hour day, but from the rapture through the tribulation and Christ's millennial reign, through the establishment of the new heaven and new earth.

Sidebar: You may wonder, as did I, if the label "thief" is the best choice when referring to the Lord when He returns. Well, that's the word Peter used, not to mention Jesus Himself.

Read Revelation 3:3.

v3

In v3 Paul switches from the church to painting a picture of how "the day of the Lord" will be experienced by unbelievers—those "in darkness."

While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

Again, remember that the "day" spoken of here refers to more than just the Rapture, the opening event of the end times. Verse three speaks from the perspective of the unregenerate—those *not* in Christ—and describes what they will experience just before and just after Jesus removes believers from the earth.

When it opens (just before the Rapture), everyone is feeling pretty good about their life: things are going well, money in the bank, a new car in the drive. What could possibly go wrong?

then destruction will come upon them suddenly...and they will not escape.

We do not know how much time will pass during these sequential events, but Scripture seems to indicate that God will waste no time. In "the twinkling of an eye" both the dead and living in Christ will be removed from the earth. This will mark the beginning of the Tribulation, and for those that remain behind, there will be no escape—at least for seven years. During this period, some will believe, and ultimately they will be with Christ, but unless they are martyred during it, they will still experience this time of tribulation. What they and the stubborn unbelievers alike will experience is caught in that word "destruction."

destruction = *olethros* = from a primary *ollumi* (to destroy; a prolonged form); **ruin, i.e. death, punishment** :- destruction.

["utter and hopeless ruin, a loss of everything worthwhile," causing the victims to despair of life itself (Thomas)]

like labor pains upon a woman with child,

I confess to having no personal experience with this, but Paul's reference here seems to be the fact that labor pains come on suddenly, without warning, and with a painful intensity—just as the opening moments of the Tribulation.

Rapture vs. Second Coming

David Guzik speaks of the contrast for the populace of earth between Christ appearing for the Rapture and His second coming in judgment.

David Guzik: This sudden coming, in a time when many say "Peace and safety!" must be distinct from the coming of Jesus described in Mat 24:15-35. The coming of Jesus described in Mat 24 happens at a time of great global catastrophe, when no one could possibly say "peace and safety!"

Let me interrupt Guzik to point out what he refers to in Matthew 24. We will look at this in greater detail during our study of 2 Thessalonians 2, but for now let's just look at two brief passages from Jesus' so-called Olivet Discourse—which was His answer to the question from His disciples, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

Read Matthew 24:21, 29-30.

Now back to Guzik

David Guzik (continued): Comparing passages like this shows us that there must be, in some way, two aspects [phases] to Jesus' Second Coming.

- One [phase] of His coming is at an unexpected hour, the other is positively predicted.
- One coming is to a business as usual world, the other to a world in cataclysm.
- One coming is meeting Him in the air (1Thessalonians 4:16-17), the other is Him coming with the saints (Zechariah 14:5).

So this moment described in v3—"While they are saying 'Peace and safety!'"—cannot be the post-tribulation second coming, but must be the pre-tribulation Rapture.

vv4-5A

When Paul says that "the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night," he, of course, is not saying that it will be necessarily dark when the Lord comes for His church. Throughout this passage he uses the image of night or darkness to represent several things:

- the time of slumber
- a time of dissipation and evil
- a state in which we can be caught unawares
- the unregenerate state

Switching pronouns again, in v4 Paul returns to speaking about what believers will and will not experience. And in this verse we have a more complete picture of what he means by the word "thief."

Read vv4-5a.

By using "thief" Paul means more than just the element of surprise or intrusion—which is how it could be interpreted in v2. In v4 we learn, I believe, that he means it quite literally.

thief = *kleptes* = from <G2813> (klepto); **a stealer** (literal or figurative) :- thief.

A thief is not just someone who catches you off-guard; he is someone who *takes* something from you.

overtake^{nasb, kjvs}, **surprise**^{niv, esv} = *katalambano* = from <G2596> (kata) and <G2983> (lambano); **to take eagerly, i.e. seize, possess**, etc. (literal or figurative) :- apprehend, attain, come upon, comprehend, find, obtain, perceive, (over-) take. **Vincent: laying hold of so as to make one's own; hence, to take possession of.**

"Surprise" (in the NIV and ESV) is too thin. Since no one but the Father knows the day and hour, *everyone* will be surprised by the Rapture of the church. But this is not just a day of rescue; it is a day of judgment.

In the day of the Lord, unbelievers will have much taken away from them: their supposed security and safety, their self-styled pleasure, their smug attitude of superiority, their peace, their joy.

In contrast, in the same moment believers will have much *given* to them: relief from a world governed by Satan; relief from sickness, loneliness and pain; a new, immortal body. Best of all, every believer, living or dead, will be given a relationship with the Lord no longer restricted to the spiritual, but now physical: face to face.

There is, nonetheless, an element of "surprise" in this moment. Those in darkness, those left behind will be surprised out of their wits. This will be unpleasant in the extreme, and the very last thing they expected.

But for those taken, those who have been living in the light, the "surprise" will be pleasant—and anticipated. It will be something welcomed. It will be a day of rejoicing.

SESSION 24: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NIGHT AND DAY

1 Thessalonians 5:5-7

PREFACE

Most of us are familiar with the way Scripture, especially in the writings of the apostle Paul, uses the flesh (*sarx*) to represent man's fallen nature and sin.

Read Galatians 5:16-21.

"Night" and "darkness" are used in a similar fashion. There is nothing inherently evil about the darkness of night; it is part of God's creation to separate one day from the next, and afford man a time of necessary rest. But over time, beginning at least in classical Greek, these two terms—*nyx* (night) and *skotos* (darkness)—took on a meaning beyond just the physical absence of light.

Not surprisingly, the words translated "day" (*hemera*) and "light" (*phōs*), are used in a similar way. Even in classical Greek, *phos* is used figuratively to mean "the light of life, i.e., life itself, which is highly valued as something bright, and as being comparable with salvation, happiness, or military triumph. The bringer of salvation can also be referred to as *phos*." So Jesus, in His sermon on the mount, employs this imagery in His encouragement and instruction for the disciples.

Read Matthew 5:14-16.

And we hear all of this in our passage; it is clear that Paul is referring to something more substantial than just the time of day or night, or how bright or dim the illumination.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:4-7.

v5

When Paul writes that believers are "all sons of light and sons of day" he emphasizes our family ties. Elsewhere this turn "sons of" or "children of" can refer to behavior—i.e., what makes us a son is that we act like (look like) our father or Lord. In Ephesians 5 Paul writes,

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:6-10)

Paul can be saying that here in this first Thessalonian letter. But I also believe he also reminds us—because we do *not* always walk in the light, we do *not* always behave like our Lord—that, no matter what, the family tie remains.

Speaking personally, my walk with the Lord began—I became His "son"—when I was seven years old. Between then and now, there have been times of disobedience, times of rebellion—times when I was *not* behaving like my heavenly Father. But because I was in His family, the Holy Spirit would convict me, and draw me back into the light. I was His child, and He would not let me go. Paul is reminding the Thessalonians: *You may not always behave as if you are*, but "you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness." In other words: *Remember who you are*.

v6

Based on that—based on who we are in Christ—Paul urges, in v6,

then let us not sleep as others do,

Just as with "night" and "day," "darkness" and "light," Paul uses "sleep" metaphorically. "Let us not sleep" is one word in the Greek: *katheudomen* [not the same word Paul uses as a synonym for death]. This word "represents the ethical insensitivity that besets people of the other realm" (Thomas). These people are "asleep" to all that is going on around them.

Let us not kid ourselves that this is simply moral laziness. Speaking just of the United States, for example, there *have* been periods during which the divide between societal light and darkness has been narrow, even marginal. The 1950s, for example.

But understand that that is no longer the case. For the last fifty years at least, there has been a concerted, systematic regimen in place to drive this nation deeper into darkness, so that today, the “ethical insensitivity” Thomas speaks of has been codified; generations have been raised, schooled, indoctrinated into this “sleep.” To them, the pitch-black bowels of darkness in which they dwell is the norm; it is, to them, light.

The word “others” in this text includes the idea of leftover, residue, refuse, and C. H. Spurgeon points out in one of his sermons on this verse, that the “sleep” in which the refuse of this world dwell is a “state of deplorable ignorance.”

Great events may have transpired in the world’s history but he knows not of them. An earthquake may have tumbled a city from its greatness, or war may have devastated a nation, or the banner of triumph may be waving in the gale and the clarions of his country may be saluting us with victory—but he knows nothing—

Sidebar: This was perfectly illustrated, once again, Tuesday morning as I watched just a few seconds of a video of a late-night rally for Hillary Clinton. Michelle Obama was speaking. She was rattling off a laundry list of ills and suffering in our nation—people out of work, violence, women treated badly, one-parent families, ad nauseum—before she declared that Hillary was the one to fix all this. And I wanted to scream at her: “How *stupid* do you think we are, lady? Your husband has been in charge for the last eight years! What has *he* done about it—and why would this woman standing beside you in a million years be the one to fix all these problems?”

But then I answered my own question. She knew she could say things like this to their ignorant base, and even others, because she and the left have been systematically cultivating, for decades, the ignorance required to believe just such twisted logic.

Spurgeon continues: The sleeper knows not anything. Behold how the refuse of mankind are alike in this! Of some things they know much, but of spiritual things they know nothing! Of the Divine Person of the adorable Redeemer they have no idea. Of the sweet enjoyments of a life of piety they cannot even make a guess. Towards the high enthusiasms and the inward raptures of the Christian they cannot mount! Talk to them of Divine Doctrines and they are to them a riddle! Tell them of sublime experiences and they seem to them to be enthusiastic fancies. They know nothing of the joys that are to come! And alas, they are oblivious of the evils which shall happen to them if they go on in their iniquity! The masses of mankind are ignorant. They know not—they have not—the knowledge of God. They have no fear of Jehovah before their eyes. Blindfolded by the ignorance of this world, they march on through the paths of lust to that sure and dreadful end—the everlasting ruin of their souls.

And, of course, since this sermon was delivered on Sunday, November 15, 1857, Spurgeon reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun.

Paul himself tells us what he means when he says, “let us not sleep.”

but let us be alert and sober.

Just as “sleep” does not mean literal bedtime slumber, so “be alert” does not mean stay awake twenty-four hours a day.

be alert^{nasb, niv}, **let us watch**^{kjvs}, **keep awake**^{esv} = *gregoreo* (gray-gor-yoo'-o) = from <G1453> (egeiro); to keep awake, i.e. watch (literal or figurative) :- **be vigilant**, wake, (be) **watch (-ful)**.

(be) **sober, self-controlled**^{niv} = *nepho* = of uncertain affinity; **to abstain from wine** (keep sober), i.e. **(figurative) be discreet** :- be sober, watch. [Even in classical Greek, this could mean retaining “complete clarity of mind and its resulting good judgment.”]

Lange: What is meant is clearness of spirit, the freshness of the sharpened sense, vigilant waiting for the Lord, circumspection over against the enemy.

Albert Barnes: As [Christ's return] may at any moment occur, why should they not be habitually sober-minded? Why should they not aim to be always in that state of mind which they know would be appropriate to meet him? Especially should Christians live with such vigilance and soberness as to be always prepared to meet the Son of God. A Christian ought always so to live that the coming of the Son of God in the clouds of heaven would not excite the least alarm. (emphasis added)

I think the best contemporary summation of "alert and sober" is *keep your wits about you*. This would include a proscription against dissipation, drunkenness, but not be limited to that. The context of this passage is staying alert and sober in anticipation of Christ's return, but it is a sound and practical counsel for all aspects of the Christian life. Let's quickly consider a few passages that require this admonition for them to work.

Read 1 John 4:1.

One cannot "test the spirits" unless one is informed, sober, alert, and has one's wits about him. And in many respects the Bereans—more than the Thessalonians—were a model for this:

Read Acts 17:11.

When one is awake, alert, sober, one is equipped to examine Scripture for oneself, "to see whether these things were so." To the Corinthians Paul established an order to worship:

Read 1 Corinthians 14:29.

Let the prophets speak, then the rest of you "pass judgment" on what they said. That cannot be done by Christians who are sleeping through their faith. In the Second Chapter of the Revelation, to the church in Ephesus Jesus said,

Read Revelation 2:2.

They had their faults, but the Ephesians were alert and sober to what they were being told by so-called prophets. Finally, further down in Chapter Five of 1 Thessalonians, Paul tells the church flat-out,

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

Finally, let's read what Jesus Himself said about keeping alert—specific to His return.

Read Mark 13:32-37.

v7

In v7 Paul illustrates how he is using the metaphors of night and darkness by describing what often takes place there.

For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night.

Paul closed v5 by stating that, "We are not of night nor of darkness," meaning that those in Christ have been transferred—at the moment of conversion—to the kingdom of light. But in the Day of the Lord, this promise takes on a new and miraculous meaning.

Read Revelation 22:5.

In the 1980s Walt Harrah wrote a song that captures the wonder and promise that awaits those who are in the eternal light of Christ. I close with the words of that song.

No More Night

The timeless theme, earth and heaven will pass away
It's not a dream, God will make all things new that day
Gone is the curse from which I stumbled and fell
Evil is banished to eternal hell

See all around, now the nations bow down to sing
The only sound is the praises to Christ, our King
Slowly the names from the book are read
I know the King—so there's no need to dread

No more night, no more pain
No more tears, never crying again
And praises to the great, "I AM"
We will live in the light of the risen Lamb

See over there, it's a mansion prepared for me
Where I can live with my Savior eternally

No more night, no more pain
No more tears, never crying again
And praises to the great, "I AM"
We will live in the light of the risen Lamb
(Walt Harrah, ©1984 Word Music ASCAP)

SESSION 25: HOPE OF SALVATION, NOT WRATH

1 Thessalonians 5:8-11

PREFACE

Writers tend to repeat themselves. Not only will they reuse words and phrases that are comfortable to them, but they will often revisit concepts and imagery that to them are especially meaningful, rich and important. These need not be of their own invention: a good writer is also a good *reader*, and familiar with earlier concepts and imagery created by even better writers. We have all of this in v8 of our passage.

Paul employs imagery he will use again, but which he borrowed from a writer predating him by roughly 700 to 800 years.

v8

In v5 Paul declared that “you are all sons of light and sons of day.” Then in vv6-7 he goes on to describe the behavior of those who dwell, instead, in night and darkness. The opposite of “alert and sober,” they get drunk and sleep (synonymous with being ignorant). He reiterates our position and calling in v8.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:8.

Let’s briefly trace the imagery Paul uses.

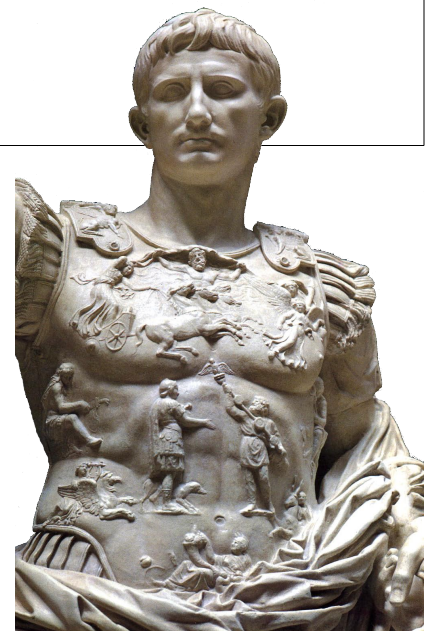
<p>Isaiah 59:17 (c. 700 BC)</p> <p>He put on righteousness like a breastplate,</p> <p>And a helmet of salvation on His head;</p> <p>And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing</p> <p>And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle.</p>	<p>1 Thessalonians 5:8 (AD 50)</p> <p>But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.</p>	<p>Ephesians 6:14-17 (AD 63)</p> <p>Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.</p>
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Additionally, in the Wisdom of Solomon, one of the volumes in what we refer to as the Apocrypha—not in our canon—we find more. This book was not actually written by Solomon, but by an Alexandrian Jew during the first century BC, impersonating King Solomon. Paul would certainly have been familiar with the work, and thus the passage in its Chapter Five.

And his zeal will take armour, and he will arm the creature for the revenge of his enemies. He will put on justice as a breastplate, and will take true judgment instead of a helmet: He will take equity for an invincible shield. (Wisdom 5:18-20 DRB)

Before we dig into Paul’s use of this imagery in our text, let me point out something that struck me this week. Although in the Thessalonian letter he calls it “the breastplate of faith and love,” in the Isaiah passage and later, in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, it is called the “breastplate of righteousness.”

Look at the image above; it is a photograph of a famous statute of Caesar Augustus. The Roman breastplate (or *cuirass*, which referred to the attached front and back pieces) could be as simple as unadorned leather, and rarely as ornate as what we see in this statue, called the *Augustus of Prima porta*, created some time during the last quarter-century before Christ. But a common feature of the *cuirass* was that it was made to represent an idealized male torso—well proportioned, well-muscled, intimidating. Forget that the one wearing the armor—be



it common soldier or emperor—could in reality be a 98-pound weakling underneath, the purpose was to portray the wearer as powerful and beautiful.

That is a perfect real-life illustration for how the “breastplate” is used in God’s word. We as believers do not stand in our *own* righteousness. In reality we are, spiritually, only 98-pound weaklings. The beauty, the strength, the rugged “virility” of the righteousness we “put on” is not our own, but Christ’s alone.

In our text, however, the “breastplate consists of “faith and love”—on which, indeed, rests our righteousness (Lange).

having put on the breastplate of faith and love,

having put on = *endusamenoi* = from <G1722> (en) and <G1416> (duno) (**in the sense of sinking into a garment**); **to invest with clothing** (literal or figurative) :- array, clothe (with), endue, have (put) on.

As best I can tell, the tense of the verb here is as it is translated in the NASB and ESV: “having put on,” that is, in Christ it is already there; we need not go to the closet every morning and put it on—although, admittedly, we may, from time to time, need to remind ourselves it is there.

breastplate = *thoraka* = of uncertain affinity; **the chest (“thorax”)**, i.e. (by implication) a corslet :- breastplate.

The breastplate, the first piece of armor, represents two essential qualities:

faith and love = *pisteos kai agapes*

Twice now in this letter (1:3 and 3:6) Paul has associated these two qualities, which seems natural: with the first comes the second.

Lange: The one cannot be without the other. Genuine faith is not a harsh dogmatism; it dwells only in a heart touched by the love of God, so that of necessity love grows out of it. A faith that does not justify itself in the way of love is not the genuine; it is a reliance on notions, instead of a personal trust in the God of grace; and through the inflation of knowledge it lays itself open to the enemy. A love, moreover, that loves not the life that is born of God, but spares the ungodly nature, is not genuine love. Only where faith and love are really and intimately one, is the Christian heart (the centre of all inward and outward life) secured within the shelter of this breastplate against all condemnation, against all thrusts of the accuser, against all devilish assaults. (emphasis added)

and as a helmet, the hope of salvation

Note how this armor protects head and heart, the emotion and the intellect, two vital components in a walk of faith—a walk in the light of “the day.” As Lange points out, our walk is one of love because it is love that has saved us, but it is also more than that. Notice how in his letter to the Colossians Paul weaves together the two.

Read Colossians 2:1-7.

Faith without knowledge is too fragile, and soon falters; knowledge without faith is too proud, and soon has no need for a Savior. They are meant to work together, and both are part of a healthy, thriving walk in Christ.

v9

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10.

For God has not destined us for wrath,

What does God’s “wrath” look like? In the Revelation, Chapter Six, we see just a portion of it, a window on part of the Great Tribulation.

Read Revelation 6:12-17.

Global humanity has never experienced anything like the consuming wrath of God—nothing remotely like this. As we see in v16, the people of this earth—those not already dead—will plead for death, for the mountains to bury them, instead of having to face Almighty God, and “the wrath of the Lamb.”

Sidebar: Can one imagine anything more incongruous than “the wrath of the Lamb”? This, in itself, illustrates the unbridled horror that awaits those who suffer this. The gentle Lamb, the Savior of peace and gentleness and grace will release the full fury of His judgmental wrath. Mere flesh shudders just to read of such things.

But the body of Christ, the church, will not experience this, for they were not “destined [or appointed] for wrath.” It was set down, before any of them were even born, that those in Christ would never personally experience the wrath of God. As individuals we have and will in our lifetimes experience His discipline, perhaps even the effects of His righteous anger—and heaven knows we certainly *deserve* His wrath. But we will never experience anything like what the remaining inhabitants of this globe will experience during the Tribulation, because the wrath we deserved—and still deserve—was borne by the Savior on the cross.

but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

We need to be careful here.

obtain(ing), receive^{niv} = *peripoiesin* = from <G4046> (*peripoieomai*); **acquisition (the act or the thing)**; by extension preservation :- obtain (-ing), peculiar, **purchased, possession**, saving.

This flexible word can refer to the *act* of acquiring, or the item acquired, and can be either active or passive. The translation “obtain” hovers over the line between the two. For example, if I go to the store to purchase a carton of milk, I have “obtained” the milk with *my* actions, *my* money and choice of selection. By all of those I *actively* took possession of the carton of milk. I obtained it.

If, on the other hand, someone gives me a birthday gift—something which *their* money and actions and choice purchased—then when they hand it to me, I *passively* obtained that gift through no effort of my own. I *received* it.

Paul himself signals how we are to interpret this word:

1:4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you
1:10 that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come
5:9 for God has not destined/appointed us for wrath
5:10a (salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,) who died for us

And, of course, we could back this up with myriad passages in the NT by the apostle Paul and other writers. Save for placing our faith in Christ, nothing we do gains our salvation—and, since, as Paul points out, we are *His* choice, even that decision is of Him. We receive (NIV) salvation through or by (*dia*, the channel of an act) Jesus Christ. *He* is active; we are passive. And v10 underlines this.

v10

(obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,) who died for us

From the perspective of two thousand years of accumulated doctrine and theology, the first words of v10—“who died for us”—are met by Christians today with a shrug. But historically, this verse is a milestone: Here in his first letter to the Thessalonian church is Paul’s first mention of salvation by means of Christ’s death. About five years later, in his letters to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, Paul will expand on this.

so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.

Paul does not launch into a treatise on the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ; he stays on topic. As Thomas puts it, “His death on our behalf...was the sole condition in procuring as God’s peculiar possession a people destined for salvation when the rest of the world is plunged into the wrath of the future day.”

Paul is closing the circle on the discussion he began in Chapter Four.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14.

Christ's death is what makes the difference, not whether we are alive or dead when He returns. When the day of the Lord arrives, our earthly-life status will make no difference; whether we are "awake"—i.e., living—or "asleep"—i.e., dead—on this earth, it is our heavenly-life status that will make the difference.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

And he wraps it up here as he did in Chapter Four.

4:17b-18 - "and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."

5:10b-11 - "we will live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing."

So long as we are alive on this earth we will require encouragement and comfort. The world in which we live—this society, this culture—has many ways of *discouraging* the Christian, of eroding the hope we have in Christ. Never forget: this is Satan's realm. He has an entire arsenal of weapons for doing great damage to our hope. He cannot remove it—and he certainly cannot change ultimate future events. But until the day we meet Christ in the air, we will need to encourage each other, building up rather than tearing down each others' faith, to counteract the corrosive effects of this fallen world—just as we already are doing.

SESSION 26: LIVING IN THE CHURCH, PART 1: SHEPHERDS

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

PREFACE

There are many ways that the church is different from the society in which it must dwell. There are, of course, exceptions on both sides, but generally speaking,

- the church is not a business, or a club, but a *family*;
- the individual members of this family are viscerally connected to one another by the blood of Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit;
- it actually practices what (at least in the United States) remains mostly just a high concept;
- unlike civil society, which in practice is mostly *linear* in its hierarchy (governance and accountability flowing in one direction), church structure is truly *circular* in nature:
- those in charge (its shepherds) govern, but work for and remain accountable to its members;
- they remain approachable “first among equals,” rather than unapproachable rulers.
- Thus, in the church, *every* member is accountable to someone above them, and accountable to everyone “below” them and, ideally, is to graciously receive (or at least consider) counsel from those over which they have charge.

The only one who answers to no one else is God the Father. To the Corinthian church the apostle Paul set down the *linear* hierarchy.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:1-3.

But note further down his reference to how it is also *circular*. The topic he is addressing is the proper order of worship, but from this we see how, unlike in general society, things are *reciprocal* in the church.

Read vv7-12.

This brings us to our passage in 1 Thessalonians 5, which speaks of *mutual edification*. The first half of the chapter was given to the church’s behavior and mindset in light of Christ’s impending judgment and wrath. He teed up the second half of the chapter and the close of this letter with v11:

Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

Paul is now shifting gears from eschatology (study of the end times) to family life in the church, addressing in vv12-22, our responsibilities to

1. our leaders (vv12-13)
2. the members of the body (vv14-15)
3. oneself (vv16-18)
4. public worship (vv19-22)

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13.

v12

we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you,

There are supernatural benefits from being a part of the body of Christ; there is no other institution like it on earth. But these supernatural benefits come with supernatural *responsibilities* as well—especially for the body’s leaders.

Read Acts 20:28.

Because they—principally pastors and elders—bear a greater burden, a greater responsibility before the Lord, they are to be recognized and respected.

appreciate^{nasb}, **recognize**^{nkjv}, **know**^{kjv}, **respect**^{niv, esv} = *eidenai* = Recognize them for what they are, and as entitled to respect because of their office.

This respect is due them because of their office and their calling, but also because they will have to answer to the Lord for their leadership and teaching.

Read Hebrews 13:17.

Read James 3:1. (not KJV)

The God-ordained work of these men is described in three ways—or three reasons they are due this respect. First, their service is hard work.

those who **diligently labor**^{nasb}, **labor**^{kjvs, esv}, **work hard**^{niv} = *kopiaō* = from a derivative of <G2873> (*kopos*); **to feel fatigue**; by implication to work hard :- (bestow) labour, toil, be wearied.

and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction

The second is that the Lord has placed them in a position of authority over the church.

have charge/are over you = *proistamenous* = from <G4253> (*pro*) and <G2476> (*histemi*); **to stand before, i.e. (in rank) to preside**, or (by implication) to practise :- maintain, be over, rule.

Sidebar: To my mind the definition of this word—"to stand before"—can have two meanings. The essential meaning of the Greek is that these individuals stand in front of the church to preside over it; they are higher in rank. So, initially, we have a kind of military picture of a leader standing in front of *and facing* those in his charge, keeping order.

But just turn that leader around, facing *away from* the troops, and suddenly we have a very different picture. First, now the leader—the pastor, the elder—is leading the charge against the enemy; he is placing himself in the most vulnerable position as the one who will meet the enemy first as the church does battle with those against it. Second, when the day of judgment comes, he must stand before the Lord first, to answer for the souls that were placed in his charge.

The third reason we are called to respect these men is that they have been placed, by the Lord, in a position to keep the church in-line: "correction administered either by word or deed" (Thomas).

give you instruction^{nasb}, **admonish** = *noutheteō* = from the same as <G3559> (*nouthesia*); to put in mind, i.e. (by implication) **to caution or reprove gently** :- admonish, warn. **Morris: While its tone is brotherly, it is big-brotherly.**

v13

and that you esteem them very highly in love...

Based on these reasons, in v13 Paul encourages the Thessalonians to have a certain response—and here the difference between the church and the world is set in bright lights. No doubt most of us have had jobs at some time in our life where an employer or supervisor—someone who "had charge over [us]"—would discipline, correct, admonish us for our behavior. Perhaps it was in a school situation, when we were sent to the principal's office for punishment, or scolded in the hallway for something we did.

In that situation we probably, outwardly, accepted the reproof—but resented it in our heart. We may even have shown our superior a measure of "respect"—but grudgingly. We certainly didn't *love* them for it.

Yet here Paul says that this is precisely what our response should be to our shepherds in the church: "esteem them very highly in love".

esteem = *hegeisthai* = middle of a (presumed) strengthened form of <G71> (ago); to lead, i.e. command (with official authority); **figurative to deem, i.e. consider** :- account, (be) chief, **count**, esteem, governor, judge, have the rule over, suppose, think. **Vincent: To lead the mind through a reasoning process to a conclusion, and so to think, to estimate.** Webster's Dictionary: esteem—to have great regard for; value highly; respect.

The conclusion is truly remarkable when we combine the three elements of this phrase—and note: there is Biblical balance to this, regarding concomitant responsibilities and behavior of the church's shepherds to the flock; just not here in our text. The word "esteem," all by itself includes the idea of generous, high regard; yet this is modified and expanded with "very highly," superabundantly (the strongest intensive possible to the language); finally, all of this is wrapped in the mantle of *agape* "love."

Matthew Poole: The words in Greek carry such an emphasis as cannot well be expressed in English, importing esteem and love to a hyperbole; their love was to be joined with esteem, and esteem with love, and both these to abound and superabound towards them.

Adam Clarke: Christian ministers, who preach the whole truth, and labor in the word and doctrine, are entitled to more than respect; the apostle commands them to be esteemed abundantly, and superabundantly; and this is to be done in love.

This is not a command; Paul opens this topic with the word *erotao*: he *requests*, he *asks*, he *urges* the church to behave this way toward its leaders. This is a request from a friend who knows what is best for them as individuals, and as a church body.

because of their work.

Here it is again; Paul raises again the first reason he gave for his request: the work of these men. Note that none of this counsel for how we are to regard the church's shepherds is based on the elder's personality, whether we enjoy being around them or not. It is based on *what they are, whose they are* (the Lord's), *and what they do*.

work = *ergon* = from a primary (but obsolete) *ergo* (to work); toil (as an effort or occupation); by implication an act :- deed, doing, labour, work.

Rev. George Barlow (in *The Preacher's Complete Homiletical Commentary*): Love them for your own sake; you have life and comfort by them. Honour them for their office's sake; they are your fathers; they have begotten you in Christ; they are the stewards of God's house, and the dispensers of His mysteries. Honour and love them for God's sake; He has sent them and put His word in their mouth. (I have left in place the original, uncomfortable "fathers" because Jesus, in Matthew 23:9, refers to how this was the title given to eminent teachers and founders of schools, to whom the people were taught to look up rather than to God. Good teachers would make men look to God, and not to themselves, as the source of power and truth.)

Live in peace with one another.

Paul closes these two verses not with a polite request, but more of a command—which suggests that the foregoing is less a philosophical exercise than Paul's addressing a specific laxity in the church at Thessalonica.

This passage tells us that there *were* individuals in the young church in a position of leadership, authority. And this last command suggests that perhaps they were *not* receiving their due recognition, that there was *not* an atmosphere of peace and brotherhood within the church. If it goes too far to say that this is a commandment from Paul—to love and be at peace with one another—we can safely say that it *was* a commandment from Christ Jesus.

Read John 13:34-35.

The church is not of this world; it is from above. There is nothing else like it in this world. It is unique, and part of what makes it so is that within its structure of leadership and membership there exists a God-given, mutual respect, love and peace. That peace is not of this world; it is from above.

Read John 14:27

SESSION 27: LIVING IN THE CHURCH, PART 2: THE FLOCK

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15

PREFACE

Last week I suggested the following order to the passage before us—vv12-22 of Chapter Five; it addresses our responsibilities within the church family to

1. our leaders (vv12-13)
2. the members of the body (vv14-15)
3. oneself (vv16-18)
4. public worship (vv19-22)

In our last session we examined the responsibility of the body to esteem those the Lord has put in place over us as our shepherds—principally, pastors and elders. In this session we look at our responsibilities of the members of the flock to each other. This would include the pastors and elders—in both directions: giving and receiving—along with everyone else.

Some early church fathers assigned the responsibilities and behavior of these two verses specifically to the church leaders, as a counterbalance to the esteem they were to receive in vv12-13. But Paul addresses *both* to the “brethren,” which includes everyone. In support of this interpretation, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, and in a passage clearly addressed to everyone in that church, says essentially the same thing. But let’s begin with our passage.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15.

Now compare our passage—especially v15—to the passage in Romans.

Read Romans 12:17-18.

v14

We urge you...

Note the difference between how Paul opens v12 and v14. In our passage last week it was a request; he was *asking* the members of the church to behave this way. Now, in v14, he uses a stronger word.

urge^{nasb, niv, esv}, **exhort**^{kjvs} = *parakaleo* = from <G3844> (para) and <G2564> (kaleo); to call near, i.e. invite, invoke (by imploration, hortation or consolation) :- **beseech**, **call for**, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) **exhort** (-ation), **entreat**, pray.

Guzik: To exhort [urge] is to tell someone what they must do, but without sharpness or a critical spirit. It is not rebuke or condemnation, but neither is it merely a suggestion or advice. It is urgent and serious, but associated with comfort.

No one I read ventured an opinion on just *why* Paul uses a stronger word for the flock’s behavior toward each other, than he does for the flock’s behavior toward the shepherds. Perhaps it is because he imagines it is easier to esteem a leader than it is to minister to or admonish a peer, so he presses a little harder for the latter.

admonish the unruly/idle

“Unruly” is the best translation of this word, but a case can be made for “idle,” which at first glance seems too tame a word. “Admonish” is the same word we ran into in v12.

noutheteo = from the same as <G3559> (nouthesia); to put in mind, i.e. (by implication) **to caution or reprove gently** :- admonish, warn.

Those we are to admonish or warn are the

unruly^{nasb, kjv}, **idle**^{niv, esv} = *ataktos* = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and a derivative of <G5021> (tasso); **unarranged**, i.e. (by implication) **insubordinate** (religiously) :- unruly; **undisciplined, out of order**, out of place.

Idleness is often the root cause of a life without order and discipline. The Greek word is a military term. If we think of the church as a company of soldiers, marching in formation, the rows and ranks in neat order, working together, the one who is unruly is the one out of step; as he meanders about at personal will, he destroys the order of the company, his mind wanders, he cares little for the integrity of the group. In this he is selfish, unfocused, idle.

Sidebar: Back in the late sixties, when I was in boot camp, our company commander had a rather demonstrative way of “admonishing the unruly”—those who broke the marching formation by being out of step with everyone else. He would come up behind the unfortunate soul and knock him upside the head, or slam his hands down on the poor boot’s shoulders. That, of course, is *not* what Paul is saying we do in the church.

This is addressed to everyone in the church, not just its leaders—but including them.

Robert L. Thomas: The only ones excused from the obligation to warn are those in need of warning.

encourage the fainthearted

encourage, comfort^{kjvs} = *paramutheisthe* = from <G3844> (para) and the middle of a derivative of <G3454> (muthos); **to relate near, i.e.** (by implication) **encourage, console** :- **comfort**.

fainthearted, feebleminded^{kjv}, **weak**^{niv} = *oligopsuchous* = literally, “small-souled” or “small-spirited.” The KJV “feebleminded” is a poor translation; these are individuals who, by nature or experience, tend to be timid and lack courage—not necessarily chronically stupid.

Some individuals *are* chronically fainthearted, and they need understanding brothers and sisters in the Lord to come alongside for encouragement. And I wonder if Paul was inspired for this thought by a reading of Isaiah 35.

Read Isaiah 35:3-5. (prefer NASB or ESV)

The writer to the Hebrews not only quotes Isaiah 35:3, but he connects this with Paul’s overarching theme of discipline and order in the church.

Read Hebrews 12:7-13.

This gives us a broader definition of what form this “encouragement” might take. Especially with the KJVs “comfort” we could think that our response to the fainthearted should be a consoling, “There, there...” But when you add in the passage from Hebrews, along with the broader context of this passage in Paul’s letter, one gets the idea that there are times when some “tough love” is called for. Encouragement can take a number of forms, including discipline or rebuke.

Sidebar: More than once in our class, individuals have admonished or rebuked me—usually gently—for something I have said. Though there may have been an immediate wounding, the result for me, in every case, was one of encouragement, and maturing growth.

help the weak

This refers not to those who are physically weak, but those who are morally or spiritually weak. They need our help.

help, uphold^{nkjv}, **support**^{kjv} = *antechesthe* = from <G473> (anti) and the middle of <G2192> (echo); **to hold oneself opposite to**, i.e. (by implication) adhere to; by extension **to care for** :- **hold fast**, hold to, support.

This help, too, can take many forms. To the Romans Paul said that one form of help to the spiritually weak should be a sacrificial giving up of some of our rights for their edification—

Read Romans 15:1-2.

—and to not be judgmental of them.

Read Romans 14:1-3.

Why us?

Ulrich Zwingli, leader of the Reformation in Switzerland, offered a pithy and succinct reason why such responsibilities are not always to be left in the hands of church leaders, but to *all* in the church.

Zwingli: Everyone is known by his neighbors better than by his minister, from whom much is concealed.

be patient with everyone

Instead of interpreting this as a separate injunction, which is perfectly valid, I prefer to see it as an all-encompassing modifier of the first three; that is,
admonish the unruly—with patience
encourage the fainthearted—with patience
help the weak—with patience

patient = *makrothumeite* = from the same as <G3116> (*makrothumos*); **to be long-spirited**, i.e. (objective) **forbearing** or (subjective) patient :- bear (suffer) long, be longsuffering, have (long) patience, be patient, **patiently endure**.

All things are to be done with patience and understanding. Admonishment, even helping the weak, without brotherly kindness and patience can seem harsh, judgmental, even dictatorial, and ultimately off-putting.

v15

Read v15.

See that no one repays another with evil for evil.

Linda and I recently watched, again, the *Godfather* trilogy. I can think of no better *negative* illustration for the church. In the Mafia culture no offense goes unanswered: in-kind, or even upgraded. In the church, *God* is the one who deals with evil. This is as it always has been. Moses speaks of it in his song in Deuteronomy 32, in speaking of the enemies of Israel.

Read Deuteronomy 32:32-43.

In Christ this is extended further. In the economy of His church, we do not just refrain from taking vengeance, sitting in the corner grumbling about the Lord's delay. No, instead of repaying evil with evil, we are to repay evil with blessing.

Read 1 Peter 3:8-12.

Starke: To requite good with evil is devilish; to requite evil with evil is heathenish; to requite good with good is commendable; to requite evil with good is Christian.

but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.

If one reads this a few times, one realizes that this is no soppy call to just be nice to each other. [The NIV is dramatically insufficient with this verse; it is far too weak.]

always seek^{nasb, esv}, **always pursue**^{nkjv}, **ever follow**^{kjv}, **always try**^{niv} =

pantote = from <G3956> (*pas*) and <G3753> (*hote*); **every when, i.e. at all times** :- *alway* (-s), *ever* (-more).

diokete = **a prolonged (and causative) form of a primary verb dio** (to flee; compare the base of <G1169> (*deilos*) and <G1249> (*diakonos*)); **to pursue** (literal or figurative); by implication **to persecute** :- *ensue*, *follow (after)*, *given to*, (suffer) *persecute* (-ion), **press forward**.

This is active and persistent; we are to *at all times actively pursue* that which is good for others.

Lange: We must pursue that which is good, it does not naturally belong to us; the evil, on the contrary, comes of itself.

And if I may be so bold as to take further issue with the NIV, this entails something far more intricate and profound than simply “try[ing] to be kind.” This verse is not a call to do to others what *they* will interpret as good and pleasant, but *that which is for their ultimate benefit*. “Christians must diligently endeavor to produce what is intrinsically beneficial to others.” (Thomas) This may be something that is initially unpleasant, but ultimately for their—and everyone’s—“good.” And Paul says this should be extended to those outside the community of believers: “for all people.”

These two verses—indeed, these last four verses—are profoundly unselfish. Paul portrays a body of believers—Christ’s flock—that is respectful, caring, giving, patient, forgiving, generously gracious. This is a high standard in this corrupt, self-absorbed world—a standard that was set by the flock’s Great Shepherd at the cross.

SESSION 28: LIVING IN THE CHURCH, PART 3: OURSELVES

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

PREFACE

We have considered our appropriate behavior towards the shepherds of the church. We have considered our appropriate behavior towards each other.
Now we consider our appropriate behavior. Period.

Last week, in the context of how we should be behaving toward each other, we read a passage from Romans 14 about those whose faith is strong, and those whose faith is weak.

Read Romans 14:1-3.

Then Paul expounds on this at length, but look at his conclusion, beginning at v16.

Read vv16-18.

What is the source of this joy? Where does it come from? David in Psalm 16 tells us

You [i.e., God] will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever. (Psalms 16:11)

How do we know the presence of God? Through the Holy Spirit—which we just read in Romans 14, and Paul states early on in this letter.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6.

So, when Paul tells us in our passage today to “rejoice always,” we know where that joy comes from, how it is manifested in our life: Not from pleasant surroundings or pleasant company; not from an easy, pain-free life, but from *the Lord*.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

v16

Be joyful always. (NIV)

The typical response to this—even from Christians—is “Yeah. Right.”

rejoice, be joyful = *chairō* = a primary verb; to be “cheer”ful, i.e. **calmly happy or well-off**; impersonal especially as salutation (on meeting or parting), be well :- farewell, be glad, God speed, greeting, hail, joy (-fully), rejoice.
always, evermore = same as last week: “every when”

For the last two sessions we have emphasized how the church, especially in its members dealings with each other, is to be different from the world-system in which it dwells. The church is to be other-worldly, to see things from a different—and better—perspective, to have a different—and better—set of values. In *this* session we emphasize how each Christian, as an individual, is to be the same.

We can trace this back to Christ Himself, in His sermon on the mount.

Read Matthew 5:10-12.

That’s about as other-worldly as one can get: rejoicing in persecution. The key to this seemingly insurmountable behavior is found in our Thessalonian passage. We make a mistake when we treat these three verses as a bullet-pointed do-list:

- Rejoice always
- pray without ceasing
- in everything give thanks

Interpreting it thus is a recipe for failure. Instead we are to read it as one contiguous thought that includes both the goal *and* the means to that goal. That is, *How are we able to rejoice always?*

By praying without ceasing and giving thanks in everything.

How many times have we wondered, *What is God's will?* Well, here we have it in v18.

this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

What *is* God's will? His will is that our life be marked by incessant joy because we are always praying and giving thanks [to Him]. On a number of occasions, both in writing and in this class, I have described this sort of life as one that "vibrates to the pitch of heaven."

v17

pray without ceasing

The first way to have a life filled with joy is to pray without ceasing, or "continually" in the NIV. This, of course, does not mean prayer in full-flower—head bowed, eyes closed, down on our knees—24/7.

At its root this kind of devotion means that we do not pray as if it is an afterthought, or as something performed halfheartedly, or (worse) by rote. We are earnest about it, and we are persistent—we do not give up when the answer is not received in the first five minutes after our "Amen."

But it also means that we nurture a life of prayer. This sort of prayer life must be practiced and nurtured because it is not natural to us; it is a skill that must be developed. But it can be developed; it can become as natural to us as drawing our next breath.

I have likened it to a vibration: all day, every day we go about our lives vibrating to the pitch of heaven, which makes our communion with God—if not literally constant—at least second nature to us. The Quaker, Thomas Kelly, from the first half of the twentieth century put it this way:

There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we can be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship, and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.

Kelly speaks of a spirit that is always multi-tasking, which is part of this life of prayer. In this way we never permit the affairs of this world to isolate us from the affairs of the Spirit. But perhaps easier to develop—though still requiring practice—is a habit of *response*—or, as Paul states in v18, "in everything giv[ing] thanks."

v18

in everything give thanks

More than just a verbal "thank you," this is an habitual mindset that acknowledges the lordship and generosity of God over all created things, all circumstances, all—*everything*. The NASB captures this idea in its translation of Colossians 4:2.

Read Colossians 4:2-3. [NASB]

Again, not just saying "thank you," but cultivating a *habit* of thanksgiving, where, our life vibrating to the pitch of heaven, we see God all around us and are grateful for His presence.

This is so far beyond just "going to church every Sunday" that most people—including many Christians—reject such a lifestyle, or just deem it unnecessary. But this is just another way to describe "walking by the Spirit," which is prescribed throughout God's word.

Read Romans 8:5-6.

But many miss the full ramifications of this; they think it stops there. They think “walking (or living) by the Spirit” just means to be spiritually minded or, a little better, to be in-tune with the Spirit within. But that is just the beginning.

If we “walk by the Spirit” this means we are nurturing a direct connection to the mind of God!

Read 1 Corinthians 2:7-13, 16.

See the progression here? In Christ believers are given the Holy Spirit to dwell within them permanently. The Spirit comes in to fill our God-space, but we can choose to disregard Him, continuing to walk by the flesh. If, however, we walk by the Spirit—nurturing the relationship God’s Spirit has with ours—then we are tapping into *the very mind of God!*

What does all this have to do with our passage in Thessalonians?

More than just a three-point do-list, Paul tells the Thessalonians, and us, in these three succinct verses that if we are in Christ it is God’s will that we give ourselves over completely to Him. Every day, in any situation, our lives are to vibrate to *His* pitch, tuned to *His* frequency.

By establishing and nurturing a relationship with God so intimate and deep that we credit and thank Him for everything around us, everything that happens—which acknowledges His lordship—and speaking with Him as easily and frequently as we draw breath—audibly, silently, wordlessly; from formal worship and praise, to wordless groanings. By living this way we will have a life so filled with Him and His Spirit that we will “rejoice always” without second thought or effort.

That is “God’s will for [us] in Christ Jesus.”

SESSION 29: QUENCHING THE SPIRIT

1 Thessalonians 5:19

PREFACE

So far, in the latter half of Chapter Five, in a passage that addresses our responsibilities to—or behavior toward—those within the church family, we have looked at

our leaders or shepherds,

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13.

the other members of the body,

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15.

ourselves.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

Now Paul addresses our behavior regarding corporate worship—although I might add that his counsel is equally applicable to our lives in general, outside of the church sanctuary. While we will focus on v19 this morning, let's read the paragraph.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22.

v19: DON'T BE AFRAID OF THAT WHICH IS OTHER-WORLDLY

Do not quench the Spirit

The Greek text of this verse means that either

- the Thessalonians *had been* quenching the Holy Spirit, and were to stop doing that,
- or they were not to start doing it (habitually).

Likewise, because Paul does not specify, this injunction can be a reference to the quenching of the Spirit

- in themselves, and/or
- in others.

The utterly unpronounceable Greek word translated “quench” means to extinguish—as in dumping a bucket of water over a campfire. And fire is the imagery here, which is interesting, since the word translated “Spirit” is the familiar *pneuma*, which means

a current of air, i.e. breath (blast) or a breeze; by analogy or figurative a spirit, i.e. (human) the rational soul, (by implication) vital principle, mental disposition, etc., or (superhuman) an angel, daemon, or (divine) God, Christ's spirit, the Holy Spirit :- ghost, life, spirit (-ual, -ually), mind.

When the people wondered if John the Baptist was the Messiah, he answered them,

“As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (from Luke 3:16)

D. A. Carson points out that John—whose baptism was one of *repentance* (Matthew 3:11), and thus only by water—says that the baptism *Christ Jesus* would bring would include the Spirit and fire as unified agents that will purify and refine.

And then, with just five brief words, Paul opens up a multi-faceted topic; we can take this in a number of useful directions.

Quenching the Spirit Within Ourselves

We do not have to purposefully set out to do it, to quench the Holy Spirit within us. In fact, one of the easiest (and most common) ways is to just forget about Him. Active sin can throw cold water on the Spirit burning within us, or we can simply ignore Him—which is sin, as well.

Paul reminded the Ephesians ([Ephesians 4](#)) of how they were now to live—how they were now different from what they once were. Near the end of a list of commands he included, in v30,

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

There is very little daylight between “grieving” the Spirit and “quenching” the Spirit; doing one is doing the other.

Quenching the Spirit Within Others by Leading them Astray

This is something that is probably not a frequent occurrence ([believer to believer](#)), but its consequences are so serious that we should be on-guard against even accidentally doing it.

Christ Jesus sends every believer in Him the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is a comforter, but He is also a goad: He prods, and pokes and convicts. The Spirit is also a *guarantor* of the promises of God. Let’s read how Jesus Himself described the work of the Spirit who would come once Jesus returned to the Father.

Read John 16:7-14.

Now, imagine a fairly new Christian. The indwelling Spirit is bringing her to life, filling her with the promises of God, interpreting His written word for her, encouraging her over the rough spots of her new faith, convicting her of lingering sin. Then we come along—we, for whom the Holy Spirit has become someone akin to an old forgotten school chum: once dear to us, but now just a forgotten picture in a dusty yearbook. And we—probably not intentionally—say or do something to this new believer that effectively diminishes the importance of the Spirit. We speak of Him out of our own ignorance of His ministry, or worse, dismissively.

Or perhaps the subject of the Spirit doesn’t even come up, but our attitude and words, instead of encouraging this fragile new faith, dampen it with our spiritual laziness, or worse, cynicism. And we have just quenched the Spirit in this new life.

Quenching the Spirit Within Others by our Behavior in Worship

Most commentators place the commands of this passage (vv19-22) in the context of corporate worship, and here is where in my estimation we can, without necessarily meaning to, do the most harm in quenching the Spirit in others.

In the typical Sunday morning worship service there are essentially two categories of responsibilities: those of the individuals in leadership, and those of the individuals in the congregation.

Leadership

Everyone—*everyone*—even tangentially involved in organizing and leading the Worship Service is responsible to do nothing that would detract or distract from the potential work of the Holy Spirit. The responsibility of the worship leaders—from the ushers, to those in the sound room, to those standing on the platform—is to *lead the congregation in worship of the Lord God*, which means not one of them should do the least thing that would lead the congregation *out of* worship of the Lord God.

It may be that many who serve on Sunday mornings haven’t thought of it in this light, but leading the worship of God is a solemn and holy responsibility, and should be approached with an earnest desire to fulfill his or her designated role before the Lord—and *to* the Lord—with the nurturing of the work of the Holy Spirit in the congregation always in sight. Permit me to illustrate the importance of this with a parable.

Albert had had a rough week. Pressures at work and conflict at home drove him to distraction—and to his knees. Saturday morning found him awake early, before the rest of the family. He went into a quiet room and poured out his heart to the Lord. By the time he rose from prayer he felt the Spirit at work in him. By the time the rest of the house was up for breakfast Albert felt as if God had lifted a heavy weight from his shoulders. For the rest of the day, through the night and into the next morning as he dressed for church, he was eager for the chance to give thanksgiving and praise to God for how He had answered his prayer. He felt enveloped in the love of God, his spirit revived, and he wanted nothing more than to worship the God who loved him so.

By the time in the service when the worship team took the stage, Albert was brimming over with devotion and joy. It was as if the clouds had parted, and he was standing before the very throne of God.

The pianist began playing the intro to the first song—but suddenly the singers, instead of raising their mics, turned to the pianist, grinning and laughing along with him for starting the wrong song. Some in the congregation good-naturedly chuckled over the mistake as well, but Albert felt the image of heaven in his mind flicker, like interference disrupting the image on a TV screen.

The words of the first song were perfectly in-tune to the condition of Albert's heart—as if God Himself had made the selection. The Holy Spirit had cleared the momentary interference, reopening the portal to the throne room of God. Singing with all his heart, Albert could picture himself bowed before the throne, pouring out praise and adoration to Father God.

The words on the overhead screen changed for the next verse—but the words were to a different song, not matching the melody at all. While the worship team sang on, oblivious to the mistake, the congregation murmured into silence. And once again, heaven faded in Albert's mind and heart, as he, along with everyone else stood silently waiting for the correct words to appear. The screen finally changed to the chorus of the correct song—but the team was already singing the next verse.

By now Albert was struggling to reconnect with his God; his heart had not changed, but it felt as if someone had just severed the cord connecting it to heaven. The next song had nothing to do with worship or praise, and the moment was gone.

Congregation

Those seated in the pews may not be responsible for *leading* the worship, but have the same burden not to do anything that might quench the Spirit in others in the congregation. Scripture doesn't seem to address this setting directly, but it does in general. In addition to Paul, here, telling the Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit, we have the apostle in his letter to the Romans.

Read Romans 15:1-2.

Add to that the command to love one another—on which Paul commends the Thessalonians—and we have sufficient grounds for the teaching that in the worship service we are to think of others before ourselves, which would include not quenching the Spirit in them. So let's consider a second, brief parable.

It is the first Sunday of the month, and Alice is bowed in prayer as she holds the bread and wine in her hands. In obedience to the Savior's command to "do this in remembrance of Me" ([1 Corinthians 11:24-25](#)), she fills her mind with the image of Christ Jesus on the cross. Her heart aches over what He suffered, but is also filled with love and gratitude that He suffered that for her. Overwhelmed with adoration for His sacrifice, her spirit rises to connect with His—when, abruptly, a woman sitting behind her turns to her husband and whispers loudly, "Will we be able to finish dinner before the game starts this afternoon?"

Suddenly Alice is torn from her contemplation of Christ's sacrifice. The image of her Lord fades quickly from her mind, replaced immediately by the image of a football game on television.

CONCLUSION

It is so important not to quench the Spirit, whether in ourselves or in others, because the Holy Spirit plays a key role in the worship of our God.

- He is the one who lifts us out of ourselves and places us before the throne.
- He is the one who focuses our thoughts on a holy God.
- He is the one who supplies the words of our praise.
- He is the one who sends back to us God's response to our worship of Him.

The Spirit is key to the transaction. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well,

"But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:23-24)

True worship is not a fleshly occupation; it is a *spiritual* occupation. So God's Holy Spirit in communion with our spirit is essential. And this means that it is not, by nature, *mechanical*. In worship we may do mechanical things—standing, sitting, kneeling, lifting of hands—but these are either prompted by the Spirit Himself, or by the worship leaders, to facilitate a spirit of worship.

No matter the situation or place—but especially in the corporate worship of a holy God—we are to guard against anything that would quench the work of the Spirit in ourselves or our brothers and sisters in Christ.

SESSION 30: LIVING IN THE CHURCH, PART 4: AN ORDERLY WORSHIP

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

PREFACE

Last week we focused on the important first verse—v19—of this last section regarding our conduct within the body of Christ. This week we look at the whole paragraph.

v19: DO NOT QUENCH THE SPIRIT

Beyond the very personal, intimate way we considered this verse last week, there are two ways to approach this.

The Holy Spirit Himself

Related to what we discussed in our last session, we are to acknowledge and respect the ministry of the Holy Spirit in every gathering of believers. He is here among us, and within each individual. He has work to do in our corporate worship, and we are to let Him do it.

What does this look like? Sometimes an example in the negative is the best illustration. Just moments before he was stoned to death, Stephen spoke to this, addressing those about to have him killed.

Read Acts 7:51.

Note, the ones he said this to were the highest religious leaders of the day: the high priest and the Sanhedrin. They were so preoccupied with the minutia of the law and the traditions they had layered upon it, they were not permitting the Spirit of God to work in their midst.

But now look at the flip-side. If the Jewish Council of the day is our negative example, Stephen is the positive.

Read vv54-56.

There is the vision of someone permitting the Spirit to work in his life: heaven is opened to him even as he remains on the soil of earth.

Our Spiritual Gifts

The second approach—the second way to “quench the Spirit”—is to repress, either corporately or within ourselves, the *gifts* of the Spirit. In three chapters of 1 Corinthians (12-14), the apostle Paul gives detailed counsel about how the gifts of the Spirit are to be incorporated into corporate worship in an orderly manner.

There several different lists of spiritual gifts in the Bible, but we find most in 1 Corinthians 12. In v7 Paul makes it clear that with the Spirit Himself, every believer is given at least one spiritual gift to be used in building up the body of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:7.

Paul then adds what we might term, from a human, fleshly perspective, some of the flashier gifts.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:8-11.

Further down in the chapter Paul adds more of these gifts.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-28.

In his first epistle, Peter reminds us that not only are we to use these gifts in the church, but he reminds us *why*.

Read 1 Peter 4:10-11.

First, in His grace, God has shared some of Himself with each of us, and we are to be good stewards of those gifts. Second, with these gifts we are to serve one another, to build up—to edify, rather than tear down—the body. Third, we are to give ourselves over to God working through us by these gifts so that both the Father and Son are glorified.

v20

Do not despise prophetic utterances

Although we will look at the next three verses individually, they are of a piece. *The Message* paraphrases it,

...don't stifle those who have a word from the Master. On the other hand, don't be gullible. Check out everything, and keep only what's good. Throw out anything tainted with evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:20-22)

The word translated “despise” means considering something so contemptible that it counts for naught, good for nothing. Paul says don't do that.

Some commentators take the position that the word “prophecies,” here, refers to *forth*-telling—not *fore*-telling; that is, not telling your future (“You will meet a tall dark stranger tomorrow.”) but telling forth a special word from God. But that is not the only position. Others point out that in Paul's time, during the formation of the church, when the canon of Scripture was not yet closed, both *forth*-telling and *fore*-telling were occurring. The best conclusion seems to be that Paul was including *both* in his command not to despise prophecy.

Note: The subject of prophecy in the church—whether first-century or modern—is too deep and controversial to cover in less than thirty minutes, and is ultimately outside the scope of this study. Our purpose should be to determine

- what Paul was saying to the Thessalonian church, and
- what application that has for us today.

Prophecy as “forth-telling”

If we trace the prophetic gift from the OT to today, we see that it has moved from the specific and rare, to the general and more common. And, of course, there are differing positions: some claim there are still prophets in the OT mold, while others say no.

- Prophets in the OT spoke *ex cathedra*: they could say “Thus says the Lord,” and what followed were the very words of God. These prophets were rare, but one disregarded them at one's peril.

By NT times, the word “prophet” had a broader range of meanings—less, “one who speaks God's very words,” to more “one who speaks on the basis of some external (typically spiritual) influence.” (This would not exclude the OT type of prophet.)

- In the NT this office was renamed, by Christ Jesus, to “apostles.” Those who spoke and wrote words that would be included in the canon of God's word were not called prophets, but apostles.
- Today we believe the apostolic age has drawn to a close, since Scripture is now complete. But Paul speaks of someone in the worship service having a spontaneous “revelation” [1 Corinthians 14:30] that they would share with everyone. The idea is God might send something of a special nature that He wishes to be revealed to the body of Christ. But this would be in no way authoritative.

Some have concluded that what we refer to as “teaching” and “preaching” could be called prophesying, since both are telling forth the truth of God. But Wayne Grudem reminds us that prophecy and/or revelation is spontaneous, unexpected, unplanned.

Prophecy has less authority than “teaching,” and prophecies in the church are always to be subject to the authoritative teaching of Scripture. Timothy was not told to prophesy Paul's instruction in the church; he was to teach them (1 Timothy 4:11; 6:2). The Thessalonians were not told to hold firm in the traditions that were “prophesied” to them but to the traditions that they were taught by Paul (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

If a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, containing interpretation of the text and application to life, then it is (in NT terms) a teaching. But if a message is the report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a prophecy.

Prophecy as “foretelling”

Was this still taking place in the first-century church? The evidence is clear that the Thessalonian church had been receiving some spurious *foretelling* prophecy—specifically regarding the end times, and Paul felt the need to set them straight. Let’s quickly trace this.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13. (uninformed = ignorant = “not to know”)

In the first half of Chapter Five one can hear Paul reminding the Thessalonians of who and what they are in Christ, and that they need not fear “the day of the Lord.”

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5, 9-10.

Just the tone of that tells us that he didn’t just pull this subject out of thin air; they *needed* to hear it. Finally, the best evidence is found in his second letter.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3a, 5.

So there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Thessalonians had been recipients of some bad foretelling “prophecy.” Even so, Paul tells them not to despise prophetic utterances. But in the next verse Paul tells them and us that we are not to believe *anything* without close examination.

v21

But examine everything carefully;

We have an example of this in the account of Paul’s travels from Thessalonica to Berea.

Read Acts 17:10-11.

The Berean situation was one of practical common sense. When they heard a teaching, as eager as they were to hear it, they made sure it squared with Scripture. How much more, then, should we, who have the completed canon, verify what we hear with God’s word. Whether from the pulpit, from a Sunday School teacher, or a spontaneous “revelation” from someone in the congregation, we are always to check it against God’s written word. And when we hear some preacher on TV declare that the Rapture will occur on Wednesday at 5:00 in the morning, we can, on the authority of Scripture, call the man a fool. [\[Matthew 25:13\]](#)

This area was so important that one of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit was one of “distinguishing [or discerning] of spirits.” I’d be willing to bet that you, like I, missed that when we were reading portions from 1 Corinthians 12.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:10 again.

The Holy Spirit endows some individuals with the gift of discernment in knowing who is sending the “revelation” through the one endowed with the gift of prophecy! The wrong spirit could be sending the message, so it was vitally important to distinguish between them.

Read 1 John 4:1-3.

hold fast to that which is good;

good = *kalos* = of uncertain affinity; properly **beautiful**, but chiefly (figurative) good (literal or moral), **i.e. valuable or virtuous** (for appearance or use, and thus **distinguished from** <G18> (*agathos*), **which is properly intrinsic**) :- × better, fair, good (-ly), honest, meet, well, **worthy**.

In this context, this means that we are to hold onto that which is of value to the church, that which builds up [edifies] rather than tears down (v22).

v22

abstain from every form of evil.

abstain = *apechesthe* = from <G575> (apo) and <G2192> (echo); (active) to have out, i.e. receive in full; (intransitive) **to keep (oneself) away, i.e. be distant** (literal or figurative) :- be, have, receive.

The KJV uses “appearance” instead of “form” or “kind”—which is a fairly literal translation, but easy to misinterpret. It does *not* mean abstain from that which appears to be evil, but abstain from evil which can be seen (Morris).

CONCLUSION

In Chapter Fourteen of 1 Corinthians the apostle Paul puts all this in order for us. As I read this, don’t be sidetracked by issues about prophecy or tongues, but note how everything is to be orderly and profitable. Note, as well, how none of the components of the assembly are considered beyond verification; none are considered to be spoken *ex cathedra*, but are to always be interpreted and evaluated for their worthiness.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-33.

SESSION 31: PRAYERS, GRACE, AND A KISS

1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

PREFACE

We have now reached the closing thoughts of Paul's letter to the Thessalonian church. He begins with a fulsome benediction, and ends with the same expression of grace with which he opened the letter.

VV23-24: BENEDICTION

The word "benediction" means, literally, a "good (*bene-*) word (*diction*)" from the Latin *benedictio*, to speak well of.

1. a blessing 2. an invocation of divine blessing, especially at the end of a religious service. (Webster's)

Here at the close of his first letter to the Thessalonians—and, as we have learned, probably his first letter written to any church—Paul signs off with a "good word"—to encourage, to uplift them, to remind them that God is faithful and at work in their lives.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely;

Of all the attributes Paul could have assigned to *theos*, he chooses the attribute of peace because his "good word" is that this God will "sanctify you entirely," or completely.

peace = *eirene* = probably from a primary verb **eiro (to join)**; peace (literal or figurative); by implication prosperity :- one, peace, quietness, rest, + **set at one again**. [translates the Hebrew *shalom*]

God's "peace" is less about happiness and absence of conflict (horizontally) than it is about *wholeness*—expanded in the next clause—and the absence of conflict vertically. For the believer, God's peace is materially represented in Christ Jesus.

Read Ephesians 2:13-16.

This "God of peace" will *Himself* sanctify—set us apart, make us holy. We do not sanctify ourselves, nor does anyone else but God in Christ. It is all wrapped up in one package: justification, salvation, sanctification—because we must be this to be given entrance into God's presence, and because we are incapable of accomplishing it on our own, He must do it for us. And what God does, He does "entirely," "completely," thoroughly, inside and out ["**absolutely perfect**"].

and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because elsewhere in his writings the apostle speaks of only two bodily components—spirit and flesh (e.g., Romans 8:4)—some commentators stand on their head to reconcile the three listed here into two. But there is no reason for that; if I, as a writer, wanted to emphasize the separateness of three distinct items, I would present it just as Paul has here: "spirit **and** [*kai*] soul **and** [*kai*] body" (emphasis added).

"The **spirit** (*pneuma*) is that part that enables man to perceive the divine" (Thomas). It is our spirit in communion with God's Spirit that makes possible our daily association with our heavenly Father, as well as our understanding of His written word.

"The **soul** (*psyche*) is the sphere of man's will and emotions. Here is the true center of personality" (Thomas).

Body = *soma* = from <G4982> (*sozo*); **the body (as a sound whole)**, used in a very wide application, literal or figurative :- bodily, body, slave.

Rev. George Barlow: There is a great trinity of powers—body, soul, and spirit—linking man with three different worlds. The physical, the intellectual, the spiritual. These three ranges of powers become gateways of temptation from three different worlds, and unless they are all consecrated we are never free from danger.

The imagery for **preserve** is less a retention of the status quo (as in canning or freezing), than a picture of keeping safe by protection, as within the protective walls of a fortress.

preserved complete, kept = *holokleron teretheie* = from <G3650> (holos) and <G2819> (kleros); **complete in every part, i.e. perfectly sound (in body)** :- entire, whole.

One cannot miss Paul's emphasis here; notice the common thread: he is pulling out of his thesaurus every word he can find to emphasize wholeness, completeness, entirety. When God does a work, He does it completely—just as when Jesus healed someone: there was no gradual restoration over time, no partial healing then let nature take care of the rest. No, when Jesus told the paralytic, "Pick up your pallet and go home," he "got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone" (Mark 2:11-12).

This is actually Paul's second benediction in this letter, and he ends both of them the same.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13.

...be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (ESV)

Dr. W. P. Pope: The same power that sanctifies as an act preserves that sanctification as a state.

The end of v23 raises a number of issues that I believe are answered by v24. As the ESV puts it, Paul prays that the Thessalonians will "be kept blameless" until Christ returns, which allows for the possibility that they may *not* be kept blameless. But what about the "perseverance of the saints," etc. Verse 24 answers this.

Read v24.

ESV: He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

If God has called you—as he puts it in the beginning of this letter, "His choice of you," that is, the believer's election—then everything in v23 He ("the God of peace") *will* bring to fruition: God will make it happen, because He is faithful—He *will* keep His word. While it is true that it is God who sanctifies us, there remains a level of personal responsibility.

C. H. Spurgeon: "If an earthly king lie but a night in a house, what care is there taken that nothing be offensive to him, but that all things be neat, clean, and sweet? How much more ought you to be careful to get and keep your hearts clean, to perform service acceptably to Him; to be in the exercise of faith, love and other graces, that you may entertain, as you ought, your heavenly King, who comes to take up His continual abode and residence in your hearts!" [quoting Manton] We know a house in which an empress rested for a very short time, and the owner henceforth refused to admit other inmates. Such is his devotion to his royal guest that no one may now sit in her chair or dine at the table which she honoured. Our verdict is that he makes loyalty into absurdity by this conduct; but if we imitate him in this procedure in reference to the Lord Jesus we shall be wise. Let our whole being be set apart for Jesus, and for Jesus only. We shall not have to shut up the house; for our beloved Lord will inhabit every chamber of it, and make it a permanent palace. Let us see to it that all be holy, all pure, all devout. Help us, O Purifier of the temple, to drive out all intruders, and reserve our soul in all the beauty of holiness for the Blessed and Only Potentate.

v25

Paul's benediction in vv23-24 is, essentially, a prayer on behalf of the Thessalonian church. Now, in v25, he says, *We need your prayers as well*. Ministers—here, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy—are no less in need of God's sanctification, and for protection (preserved) from those people and evil spirits that would bring harm to their ministry.

In fact, it is often the case that pastors and evangelists suffer greater temptation to sin than the average parishioner in the pews, for Satan appreciates the coup he reaps whenever a church leader falls. Our pastors, our elders and deacons—our shepherds—our teachers, and our missionaries should be at all times lifted up to the throne for their protection against the evil one, and the righteous success of their calling and mission.

Rev. George Barlow: The richest inheritance of the anxious minister are the prayers of his people. A praying Church will never have to complain of an insipid and fruitless ministry.

v26

Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.

Thomas: 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).

[Thomas continues] It was quite appropriate that a symbolic greeting be adopted. It was to be “holy” (hagid), 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.

Just as individual families will favor one form of greeting over another, based on the personalities of their members, so to the individual, local bodies of Christ will have their preferred form of greeting. I have been in churches where members made a point of slobbering over each other with grand, unrestrained affection; I have been in churches where the custom was more the restrained, polite handshake. For it to be “holy”—“such as is becoming to saints,” as Thomas puts it—the visitor or novice should, as well as possible, conform to the local custom—not to mention *national* custom: men kissing men might be perfectly natural in France or Saudi Arabia; less so in the American Midwest.

But Paul is emphasizing not so much the specific *form*, but that the members of the church are to remember and demonstrate that they are members of a loving, supportive *family*.

v27

I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

His last bit of counsel is expressed with greater strength—not a request at all, but more a command.

NKJV: I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.

ESV: I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

We can't say for sure why Paul insists—with the weight of an oath, and carrying “implications of divine punishment for failure to comply”—that they read this letter to everyone. But I think we have some clues within this letter and elsewhere.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:37-38.

Whether or not Paul expected his letters to eventually be included in the canon of Scripture, he certainly understood that both his in-person teaching and now his teaching through correspondence included the counsel of very God. Perhaps because this was his first such letter he felt the need to so strongly command the leaders in Thessalonica to read this letter to “all the brethren.”

After a while he didn't have to include such a command in his letters because he knew that they *would* be shared—not just in the local congregation, but with others.

Read Colossians 4:16.

v28

Paul closes this letter by returning to his favorite topic: grace. And he probably added this brief benediction in his own hand.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

SESSION 32: GROWING THROUGH HARD TIMES

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

PREFACE

The evidence from the account in Acts is that the apostle Paul wrote his second letter to the Thessalonian church just shortly after writing the first—perhaps within a few months, and also from Corinth, from where he had written the first.

The evidence cited is that there is no mention of Silvanus (Silas) or Timothy being with Paul after they joined him in Corinth from Macedonia (Acts 18:5). So if they are still with him (1:1), he must have written this second letter, as the first, while still in Corinth, where he was for about a year and a half.

As with most of his letters, we can deduce from its content the *reasons* for this second letter:

- their persecution had worsened;
- spurious documents and teachings, falsely ascribed to Paul, were circulating bad information about the end times;
- and some of the Thessalonians, thinking the return of Christ was imminent, had adopted some bad habits regarding work.

This second letter has a slightly harsher tone to it, perhaps some impatience, and certainly sterner counsel. The reasons for the letter aside, I think this is natural in human correspondence. Our first letter to a new friend or associate may be more formal, more gracious, with subsequent letters getting to the point more quickly, with succinct, un-flowery prose. All of these result in a shorter, more direct letter—one, while not ungracious or unloving, has, in some passages, the tone of a stern and frowning pastor or human father.

vv1-2

Paul's greeting is identical to his greeting in the first letter—save for one word and a repetition.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2.

Question: Which word did he change in v1? (answer: "God *the* Father" to "God *our* Father")

This is not a dramatic change from the first letter—and the second "our" in v2 of some translations is on shakier ground textually—but the insertion of "our" does serve to emphasize the dramatic theological point made by Jesus Himself, that in Him God is not just His Father, not just the "Father" of the nation Israel ([Deuteronomy 32:6](#)), but every believer's Father ([Matthew 5:16](#)).

v3

Verse 3, at least for me, is an instructive example of the value in not always trusting your first interpretation of a passage.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3.

Initially, in my workbook, I circled the word "ought" and made a note off to the side: "'ought?' don't they?" That is, the way I first read this word was that Paul was saying that they "really *should be* giving thanks to God for them," implying that they were perhaps derelict in this. But that's not what he is saying.

We ought, We are bound^{kjvs} = *opheilomen* = or (in certain tenses) its prolonged form *opheileo*, of-i-leh'-o; probably from the base of <G3786> (*ophelos*) (through the idea of accruing); **to owe** (pecuniarily); figurative **to be under obligation** (ought, must, should); morally to fail in duty :- behave, be bound, (be) debt (-or), (be) due (-ty), be guilty (indebted), (must) need (-s), ought, owe, should. See also <G3785> (*ophelon*).

Paul here (and nowhere else, save for v2:13) declares that he and Silvanus and Timothy are *under personal obligation* to give thanks to God for the Thessalonians, and he follows this with, “as is only fitting” (NIV: “rightly so”). Behind this is a larger issue; Paul was not just commending the church in Thessalonica (which he does in the remainder of this verse) but is expressing his personal debt of thanksgiving to Christ for his (Paul’s) salvation.

And here is a valuable lesson for us. One of Paul’s better qualities was that he never forgot, and repeatedly gave thanks for, what Christ had done—not just for those in the churches he began, but for him. If we lift this out of the immediate context—he gives thanks for the Thessalonian’s maturing, deepening faith during persecution—it is a reminder to each of us to continually express to God our gratitude for what Christ has done for us. We hear this more specifically in Paul’s second use of this word translated “ought” or “bound to” in the second chapter.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

Every day, in one form or another, we should look up and declare, “My God, thank you for saving me!” More than that, our lives should be dedicated to His service—not to repay what He has done, for that would be impossible, but out of gratitude and adoration for His mercy and grace. Out of His grace He saved us, and out of that same grace He apportioned to every one of us certain gifts to equip us for service to Him and His church. It is “only fitting.”

Faith

because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater;
In his first letter to them, Paul first commends them for their faith and their “labor of love”—

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

—but in Chapter Three he suggests there is still room for improvement:

as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith? (1 Thessalonians 3:10)

Here at the beginning of his second letter we seem to have evidence that there had indeed, in just a few months, been marked improvement in *both* areas of faith and love. He gives thanks that their “faith is greatly enlarged”—

greatly enlarged^{nasb}, **grows exceedingly**^{kjvs}, **growing more and more**^{niv}, **growing abundantly**^{esv} = *hyperauxanō* = from <G5228> (huper) and <G837> (auxano); **to increase above ordinary degree** :- grow exceedingly.

—and their (agape) love for one another “grows ever greater.”

grows ever greater^{nasb}, **abounds**^{kjvs}, **increasing**^{niv, esv} = *pleonazo* = from <G4119> (pleion); to do, **make or be more**, i.e. increase (transitive or intransitive); by extension to **superabound** :- abound, abundant, make to increase, have over.

Even with the problems they were having that are addressed by Paul in this letter, this was a church on the rise. As we learned from the first letter, the apostle was pleasantly astonished that they immediately set out to spread the gospel through the Macedonian region. Now he commends them for their deepening faith and love toward each other.

This is no accident; these two—faith and love—are not disassociate qualities of a church. **Turn to Galatians 5.** The Galatian church was struggling against some Judaizers—or legalizers—Jewish Christians who wanted to impose some of the requirements of the Jewish Law, such as circumcision, on followers of Christ. And in one of his arguments against this encroachment on the freedom believers have in Christ, Paul points out to the Galatians what is *really* important.

Read Galatians 5:4-6.

“Faith working through love,” or, as the NIV has it, “faith expressing itself through love.” That is, our love—for each other, for our neighbor, for the unsaved—is the *outflow* of our faith. The word translated “working” is *energeo*, which means to be active, to be at work. Love is faith *at work*; it is the expression of our faith. So it only follows that as our faith increases, as it grows and matures and deepens, so will our love, because both are based in our relationship with Christ Jesus. Notice how Paul associates faith and love in two other passages. To the Ephesians he signed off with

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 6:23; emphasis added)

and to Titus he wrote

All who are with me greet you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all. (Titus 3:15; emphasis added)

So, back in v3 of our Thessalonian text, it follows that as their “faith is greatly enlarged” the “love of each one of [them] toward one another [would] grow ever greater.” Love follows faith. The deeper our faith in Christ, the greater our love for each other.

v4

At the beginning of his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul remarks, almost with amazement, that the church already has a favorable reputation throughout the Macedonian region and beyond.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8.

In the first letter he says that “we need not say anything.” In the second letter, however, he goes out of his way to announce that “we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches.”

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4.

The “therefore” (or KJVs’ “so”) tells us that his “boasting” is based on their growing, maturing faith and love. And while the first part of v4 may sound to our ears a bit tinny, even out of character for the apostle—he is “speaking proudly,” “boasting” about, even “glorying” in a church he recently planted—he will do it again.

In his second letter to the Corinthian church, in an effort to improve their grace and giving, we have an example of what he speaks of in our text, using the Thessalonians as a positive example.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-2.

But he also boasted in the opposite direction—using the Corinthian church as a positive example to the Macedonian churches, which would include Thessalonica.

Read 2 Corinthians 9:1-2.

So while on the surface of v4 this pride or boasting may appear a little unseemly, two points are in order:

- Paul’s motives are pure. His purpose is to encourage all the churches to righteous, Christ-honoring behavior. To that end he will occasionally cite the example of another church—either as a positive or negative goad.
- He has just said that he gives “thanks to God” for what the Thessalonians have accomplished in their walk. That is, he directs his thanksgiving and praise upward to God for what He—the Lord—has accomplished in their midst. I don’t think his attitude about this would change between v3 and v4. He may sing the praise of this church or that to encourage another church, but he does not lose sight of where the real praise should go.

All of this is about the Thessalonians’ perseverance, or steadfastness of faith, through “persecutions and afflictions.”

persecutions = *diogmos* = to chase, to pursue

afflictions = *thlipsis* = from <G2346> (thlibo); **pressure** (literal or figurative) :- afflicted (-tion), **anguish**, burdened, persecution, **tribulation**, trouble, **distress**.

That is, the first word describes what has been happening to them, while the second describes the effect it has had on them. And through it all, their faith, along with their love for each other, has actually *grown*.

No matter what issues Paul later addresses in this letter regarding any deficiencies on their part, the church in Thessalonica is one we, too, can look to as an example of remarkable endurance and faith through trials.

SESSION 33: PROOF OF GOD'S RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT

2 Thessalonians 1:(4-)5

PREFACE

There is a lot to digest in the passage before us, and, once again, the good intention of covering a paragraph is thwarted by the immense depth of God's word contained in just the first sentence. Even though we covered it in our last session, I include v4 because it is key to understanding v5.

Sidebar: It is passages such as this that make the deep study of God's word so rewarding and pleasurable. Not everyone agrees on its interpretation, but when one considers both positions and discovers that they really form one cohesive, powerful thought, it is reason to marvel at the wisdom and, as our text states, the "righteous judgment of God."

v5

The fundamental question that interpreters must answer in deciphering v5 is, Does the "righteous judgment of God" apply to the present situation—i.e., the church in Thessalonica—or to the future—that is, the end times?

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:5.

Sidebar: Now stick with me on this. We need to get down into the weeds, but it will be worth it. This is how this passage truly comes to life for us.

"This is" or the NIV's "All this," points back to v4's "your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure." Verse 6 then seems to substantiate the "present situation" position with

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

But then from v7 to v10 the text refers explicitly to the yet-future end times.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10.

I believe the KJV helps us out here. What the other translations speak of as "evidence" or "plain indication,"—[perfectly acceptable translations](#)—at the beginning of v5, the KJV terms a "manifest token." What is a token? *Webster's* says that a token is "a symbol; something serving as a sign of authority, identity, genuineness."

When we got married forty-six years ago, Linda and I exchanged rings which we still wear. In a sense these rings were given, back in 1971, to indicate *our love for each other at the time*. The rings, along with the ceremony itself, told everyone present that our love was a love worthy of our getting married to each other—becoming one under God.

But these rings were also a "token" of something else—something yet future. They represented not just our love at the time, but were a *pledge* of a love we were then too young even to imagine. They were a "manifest" ([something visible and tangible](#)) "token"—a sign, a promise—that we would still be there when our small, teenage love would mature into something far more profound. Our two rings spoke of the here and now in 1971, but they also spoke of the future, many decades down the road. They were "tokens" of both.

The persecution the Thessalonians were experiencing in AD 51, when this letter was written, the Philippians would experience about ten years later. And what Paul wrote to them illumines our passage.

Read Philippians 1:27-30.

Look at v28. Paul tells the Philippians that when they are not alarmed by their opponents—when they stand strong in their faith—they are a sign, a token, both to their opponents and to themselves:

- The Christian's resolve in the face of persecution would signal to their opponents that they were doomed; against such a faith there could be no victory, only perdition.
- Their resolve and strong faith in Christ also signaled to the believers that their salvation was sure. As believers they would indeed suffer, just like Christ and the apostle Paul, but even that suffering was granted to them by God as a token of their belonging to Him and of His promise to them.

Now back to our text.

Understand, the fact that the Thessalonians were suffering under persecution for their faith was not the token, but the "*perseverance and faith* in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure" (emphasis added). And this perseverance is not just gritting one's teeth and holding on with white knuckles until all the unpleasantness passes.

perseverance^{NASB, NIV}, **patience**^{KJV}, **steadfastness**^{ESV} = *hypomone* = from <G5278> (hupomeno); **cheerful (or hopeful) endurance, constancy** :- enduring, patience, patient continuance (waiting).

It is what Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome.

Read Romans 5:1-5.

Paul says that it is the Thessalonian's *perseverance* that is the token, the evidence of proof of God's righteous judgment. So we must then ask the obvious question: How so? How does our perseverance in trial demonstrate or reveal the righteous judgment of God?

Back when I was still in grade school—probably around the fifth grade—one day after school, instead of going straight home I accompanied the two Nelson brothers down to the creek that ran behind the school to catch frogs and crawdads.

Now, the school was just one block from our house, as the crow flies. To get to school each day I could "cut through" our back yard, then Wiggins' back yard, down their drive, cross the street, and I was in the school yard. It took all of two or three minutes. From our house one could hear all the bells, so Mom knew when school was let out and we were released from prison. Within five minutes I should be home.

On this day I was 30 minutes late and Mom was beside herself with worry. The Nelson boys, having parents who didn't care a whit where they were or what they were doing, had left our brief adventure at the creek moving on to some other adventure. I, however, went home to my certain doom.

I knew I would get a lickin' when I got home—and I did. But even at that young age I understood that though I had received a warmed bottom for my foray to the creek that day, while the Nelson boys were free to do whatever they wished for as long as they wished, I was indeed the fortunate one. For I was the one who had parents who loved me enough to worry about where I was, and what I was doing; parents who loved me enough to chastise me when I did something foolish and wrong.

David Guzik: We usually think that God is absent when we suffer, and that our suffering calls God's righteous judgment into question. Paul took the exact opposite position and insisted that their suffering was evidence of the righteous judgment of God. Where suffering is coupled with righteous endurance, God's work is done. The fires of persecution and tribulation were like the purifying fires of a refiner, burning away the dross from the gold, bringing forth a pure, precious metal.

God's righteous judgment

We will see this more powerfully in the following verses, when we consider the *future* ramifications of this text—that is, God's ultimate and final judgment—but let us glean something about this righteous judgment even in the here and now.

The righteous judgment of God is seen, first, in His determination to refine His children through trial—

- for our benefit,
- as a righteous witness to those seeking to harm us,
- and for His ultimate glory.

And as Guzik points out, when “suffering is coupled with righteous endurance, God’s work is done.” Look at all He has accomplished when his people persevere under affliction (v6)! But I think there is more; there is one more aspect of His righteous judgment, one that requires careful explanation.

When we read the word “judgment” in association with a sovereign, righteous God, we naturally think of His *ultimate* judgment—as indeed we should. Christ Jesus described it to his disciples:

Read Matthew 25:31-33.

But in the context of our passage in 2 Thessalonians, I think we can include at least one more aspect of God’s judgment. I believe His righteous judgment is demonstrated in His sovereign election of believers.

God never makes a bad decision. Even when, on occasion, as during the time of the exodus, God “changes His mind” (repents; Exodus 32:7-14) that doesn’t mean there was anything wrong with His initial decision. If He had not changed His mind and followed through on His judgment to destroy Israel for their rebellious idolatry, that act would have been utterly righteous. He would have been perfectly right to respond in that manner to their heinous behavior. God never makes a bad decision.

Just so, before He inaugurated time and space and all creation, God set down the names of all those who, once they were physically conceived, would be in His kingdom. This, too, was His judgment. And it was righteous; it was right.

What if God *could* make a bad decision? What might it look like? Well, let’s say Joe Smith is a member of the church in Thessalonica. God has placed his name in His Book of Life. Joe is one of the elect. Then the church comes under brutal persecution and affliction from without. Most of those who comprise the church bear up under it, and retain their faith and hope in God. But ol’ Joe says he has had enough; this wasn’t what he bargained for. He turns his back on the church, rejects God and His Son Jesus, leaves Thessalonica for his home village and his old paganism. Till the day he dies he remains a worshiper of idols, and his soul is consigned to hell.

In this hypothetical—**and impossible**—scenario, God made a bad decision in placing Joe’s name in His Book of Life. But God never makes a bad decision, so in Thessalonica every person who’s name is recorded in God’s Book of Life persevered through the persecution, and their faith and love for each other actually grew stronger as a result. And *that* was a token of “God’s righteous judgment” in choosing them in the first place. Because God does not make bad decisions.

considered worthy of the kingdom of God

Guzik: The idea behind counted worthy is not “seen as worthy” but “reckoned as worthy” as in a judicial decree. Paul’s prayer is that the worthiness of Jesus may be accounted to them.

This is an important point. We are not “considered worthy of the kingdom of God” because we have held onto faith through persecution or trials; that is, we have not *earned* our place in His kingdom by toughing it out through hard times. Rather, our perseverance demonstrates that we are indeed, *in Christ*, worthy. It works like this:

- Someone *not* a believer suffers persecution and, as a result, curses God. His behavior proves he is not worthy of the kingdom.
- A Christian suffers persecution, accepts it, even gladly embraces it. His behavior proves that he (already a believer) *is* worthy of the kingdom. His behavior is a “token,” an indication that he already belongs in the kingdom.

for which indeed you are suffering.

After Christ Jesus laid hold of Saul on the road to Damascus and blinded him, he instructed Ananias to go to him and give him back his sight. But Ananias wasn't too keen on the idea.

Read Acts 9:13-16.

The word translated "suffer" is the same as in our text.

suffer, suffering = *pascho* = **to experience a sensation or impression (usually painful) :- feel, passion, suffer, vex.** This is the word from which we get "Paschal Lamb," "The Passion of Christ," "Passion Play," etc.

We will look at this more in our next session, but God's word makes it clear that the believer's path of (progressive) sanctification in Christ will include a measure of suffering. As the apostle Paul told the disciples in his travels, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). The Thessalonians were learning that suffering was part of God's readying them for His kingdom; that too is part of His "righteous judgment."

SESSION 34: THE REVELATION OF CHRIST'S GLORY

2 Thessalonians 1:5-8

PREFACE

We find ourselves once again in the midst of another of the apostle Paul's interminable sentences—some translations, such as *Young's Literal*, begin the sentence at v3 and do not end it until the end of the chapter, v12. So, once again, if we are to study this passage in earnest we are forced to begin and end each of our sessions before reaching the closing period.

Last week we applied v5 to the present-day situation of the Thessalonians. They had been demonstrating "perseverance and faith in the midst of all [their] persecutions and afflictions"; this, Paul says, was "a plain indication of God's righteous judgment," which reckoned them worthy of God's kingdom. Now, in this session, we will use vv5-6 as a launchpad into a *future* sense of God's "righteous judgment."

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:4-6.

vv6-7A

Verse 6 opens the door to the *parousia*—the final coming of Christ, and His subsequent judicial role—but we need not restrict its interpretation to that time frame. Indeed, for many who oppress and persecute Christians their judgment will not occur until the *final* judgment, when Christ Himself will winnow the chaff from the wheat, the goats from the sheep. But that does not mean that some do not receive their "comeuppance" in the here and now.

The beginning of v7 continues this thought:

[6] For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, [7a] and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well

The rest of v7 makes clear that Paul is speaking of God's *future* retribution against those in opposition to believers and the faith.

...when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,

That is the intended context, of course, but I don't think we do violence to the passage if we remind ourselves that sometimes God's judgment does not tarry, but is meted out fairly quickly. It does not mean that the Lord ignores our affliction—indeed, it may have come from Him in the first place—or those who inflict it, putting off any response until The Day. He may immediately repay in full, or He may bring partial relief.

For example, when the Egyptians were in pursuit of Israel, the Lord could have stopped them on the west bank of the sea with His pillar of cloud until Israel was safely on the east bank, and held them there until the water returned to its place. That would have brought relief to Israel. Instead, He invited the Egyptians to pursue, then drowned them in the returning water.

The important lesson is not *when* He chooses to respond, but the promise that He will.

v7B

With the second half of v7—and some interpreters say even v6—we are now firmly in the context of The Day, the *parousia*, the day of Final Judgment after Christ's return. Let's get our bearings: In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul spoke of Christ's *first* return—not to earth, but to "the clouds" above it.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

This first account describes the "rapture" of the church, when Jesus returns to lift all believers—dead and alive (in that order)—from the earth before the commencement of the Tribulation, which will last seven years. The Tribulation will end with the *second* return of Christ, which is addressed here in our passage in the second letter.

Judgment and retribution will not be a part of His first return, but *will* be of His second.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8.

Sidebar: Some interpreters say that the relief mentioned in vv6-7a speaks of the relief Christ will bring to those who have been persecuted during the Tribulation. They may indeed be included in this, but Paul speaks to the Thessalonians, in v6, of “those who afflict you,” and in the beginning of v7, “to give relief to you.” This final and absolute repayment of affliction upon those who afflict believers will indeed take place at (and after) Christ’s return, but Paul does not limit the afflicted only to those alive during the Tribulation.

Christ’s first return will be momentary (“in the twinkling of an eye”) and specifically focused on the righteous dead and living; those left behind will know only that some who had been next to them had, mysteriously and suddenly, vanished. Christ Jesus will not be seen by anyone not joining Him “in the air,” “in the clouds.”

For the redeemed there will be a sweetness about Christ’s first return—certainly a time of rejoicing and wonder as every follower of Christ, dead and alive, receives a new body fit for heaven. But while there will certainly be majesty and glory and wonder attendant to Christ’s *second* return, there will be no sweetness, no rejoicing. The prophet Zechariah offers us a frightening account of “The Day of the Lord.”

Read Zechariah 14:1-15.

[Back to our text.](#)

Note how in contrast to His first return, when Christ will “descend from heaven,” but remain “in the clouds,” “in the air,” now at His second return he is “revealed from heaven,” but (as we know from Zechariah 14:4) now “His feet will stand” upon the earth. And two other things are “revealed.” ([literally, “at the revelation of the Lord Jesus”](#))

revealed = *apokalypsei* (verb form of *apokalypsis*) = from <G601> (apokalupto); **disclosure** :- appearing, coming, lighten, manifestation, be revealed, revelation; to “take off the cover.”

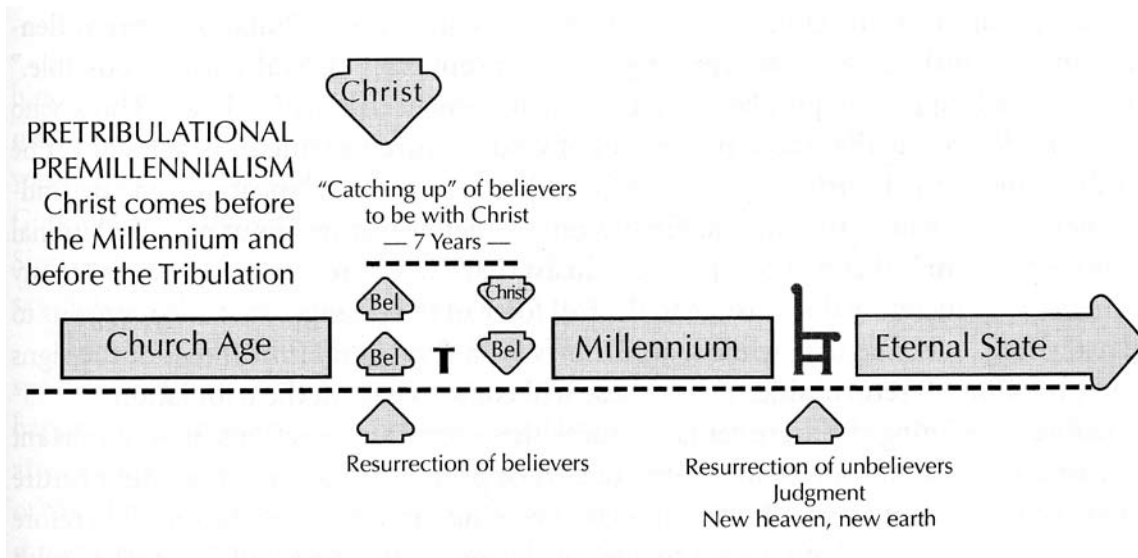
Sidebar: Now is a good time to reiterate something mentioned earlier in this study. The respected scholar, Wayne Grudem, writes, “The interpretation of the details of prophetic passages regarding future events is often a complex and difficult task involving many variable factors.” I would punctuate that with a hearty “Amen!”

There are many different interpretations of Biblical text regarding the end times; some have been given very long, fifty-cent labels, and the interpretation subscribed to by our church (and this teacher) has the longest label of all: *Pretribulational Premillennialism*. ([see chart on next page](#))

We should all keep in mind that many faithful, Bible-believing followers of Christ disagree on the sequence of events of the end times; for example, Grudem himself subscribes to the historic *Premillennialism* position, and his arguments for it are well-reasoned and convincing.

So while any of us can rightfully say, “This is what I believe God’s word says about the end times,” we should avoid any dogmatic, insistent arguments about our position, and remain gracious toward those holding a position with which we disagree.

Keep in mind, too, that any eschatological position is based not on one, definitive proof-text, but on a close examination of many, and how they are woven together. Our current passage is a case in point; it would be very difficult to establish the *Pretribulational Premillennialism* position on this text alone—which is why I have spent a lot of time last week feeling like I was chasing my own tail. In fact, this passage and especially Chapter Two were in Pastor Jeremy’s mind when he replied to my pitch for teaching these two letters with (in so many words), “Are you sure you’re up to it?”



(from *Systematic Theology*, by Wayne Grudem)

His mighty angels

This does not refer to *all* the angels. King David had his "Mighty Men," a subset of his army consisting of thirty of his most powerful, reliable warriors. Similarly, Christ Jesus has His "Mighty Angels," or, *literally*, "the angels of His power" That is, these are the angels who are the ministers by whom He makes His might to be recognized. It is not *their* might, but *His* might. David's men were noteworthy for their own power and prowess; Christ's mighty angels are noteworthy for their effectiveness in channeling *the Lord's* power.

in flaming fire

This is not the fire of hell, or a fire of cleansing. I think the best explanation of this is that it is a way to describe Christ's inherent *glory*, a manifest sign of His majesty and power. But it also may have a dual purpose: that glory, described by mortal man as "blazing fire," may upon His arrival—this is a day of judgment, after all—point to the horrible end awaiting some who witness His arrival.

Sidebar: The NASB and NIV include this at the end of v7, while the KJVs and ESV place it at the beginning of v8.

We see this in a scene painted by the prophet Isaiah which, while also having more contemporary application for Jerusalem, echoes the passage in Zechariah regarding the return Christ in all His glory to judge the peoples.

Read Isaiah 30:26-28.

My guess is that on the day we finally stand before the actual supernatural "glory of God," we, too, will be so awed that we will struggle to describe it with words. And although this is not textually the flames of hell, on the day they will be *effectually*.

Read Hebrews 10:26-27.

Read Hebrews 12:28-29.

Those not in Christ, on the day He appears, will see the "flaming" glory of the One who will consign them permanently to the very flames of eternal death. The glory of God in Christ, no matter how it is described, is the manifestation of His purity, holiness and righteousness, and sinners cannot stand against that—which is what v8 speaks to.

v8

In the NASB the sentence begins in v6, so let's back up to that.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8

retribution^{NASB}, **vengeance**^{KJV, ESV}, **punish**^{NIV} = *ekdike sin* = from <G1556> (ekdikeo); vindication, retribution :- (a-, re-) venge (-ance), punishment.

"The word stem for *ekdike sin* (this word) is the same as that for "righteous" in v5, and "just" in v6" (Thomas). So Christ's act here is not one of selfish vindictiveness or revenge, but emanates from a righteous judge meting out appropriate justice for a "criminal offense." When a human judge assigns punishment to a criminal in a court of law, we do not say that the judge is taking personal vengeance, but that he is just rendering a righteous and deserved verdict with punishment. That is the setting here, "the idea of a firm administration of unwavering justice" (Morris).

This "penalty" (v9) is meted out to two different groups; some commentators assign the first description to Gentiles, or heathen, and the second to Jews. But there is no good reason to so restrict the application: Scripture records both descriptions being applied to both groups, Jews and Gentiles. So let's just consider the text as it is.

those who do not know God

These are individuals who are more than just ignorant, but who have willfully removed themselves from knowing Him—a "criminal blindness" (Lange). They have purposely steered clear of any opportunity to learn of God. They are ignorant of God because they *want* to be.

those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus

This would refer to anyone who *is* familiar with the teachings of God, but rejects Christ. But then Lange deduces that not only should we not apply this to Gentiles and Jews, but really it is not even two different groups.

Lange: ...we shall do better to find already in the eighth verse a description, not of two classes of men, but merely of the two poles of enmity against God: the fundamental aversion of men generally, and the consummation of their contumacy [haughty, stubborn refusal to submit to authority], when the opportunity of faith has been afforded them.

We will pick this up again in our next session, when we look at vv9-10.

SESSION 35: PAYING THE PRICE

2 Thessalonians 1:9-10

PREFACE

In the news last week was a story that perfectly illustrates our passage in this session. As you may recall, some of the foaming-at-the-mouth complainers about the Trump presidency staged a “Day Without Immigrants” protest on February 16, intended to demonstrate how indispensable to our economy and the service industry illegal immigrants have become. So thousands, some without even the courtesy of informing their employers, dutifully skipped work that day to march in the streets and carry signs.

At last count at least one hundred (and surely more) learned that day how *dispensable* they really were. When they reported for work later that day or the next, they learned that they had been fired for skipping work.

- Twenty-five workers at *Ben’s Kosher Delicatessen Restaurant & Caterers* in Long Island, N.Y., were fired. There, police escorted the workers from the restaurant after they returned from the protests.
- Twelve Latino employees from the *I Don’t Care Bar and Grill* in Tulsa, Okla., were fired after they didn’t show up for their shift and failed to let their employers know about their absence. The employees [said] that they expected to be reprimanded, but not dismissed. Turns out the management at the *I Don’t Care Bar and Grill* did indeed care.
- About twenty employees were fired at *Bradley Coatings Inc.*, in Nolensville, Tenn., after participating in the protest. **The company’s attorney said the employees knew they were risking termination by participating in the protest.**
- In Colorado, 30 bricklayers were fired after they didn’t show up for work. Jim Serowski, the founder of *JVS Masonry* in Commerce City, Colorado, said: **“If you’re going to stand up for what you believe in, you have to be willing to pay the price.”**
- *Encore Boat Builders LLC*, based out of Lexington, S.C., had 21 workers who didn’t show up for work Thursday. **They were told not to participate in the demonstrations or face termination and when they failed to show up, the company followed through on its threat.** (Source: PJMedia.com)

As we will see, this is a made-to-order, contemporary illustration for our passage today.

v8

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10.

Sidebar: While it is true that this passage speaks of dark days for many, I must confess these two verse are great fun to study. The page in my workbook for these verses has arrows shooting all over the place. And the first word of v9 has the first arrow pointing somewhere else.

Question: To whom does “These” or “They” in v9 refer?

Answer: “those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” in v8.

Paul expands on this damning but rather sterile description of the unregenerate in his letter to the Philippians.

Read Philippians 3:18-19.

Our context here is God’s balancing the scales of justice; specifically, he is meting out *His* “affliction” on those who afflicted His people. But the description of this retribution is not and will not be limited to those who have intentionally persecuted the followers of Christ. It will be handed down to everyone whose name is not written in the Book of Life.

And what we must remember is that, just like many of those workers who lost their job for failing to show up for work, *they were told*. Last week we made the point that “those who do not know God” are not passively ignorant, but willfully blind. They *know* what they are rejecting. Here is how the prophet Jeremiah describes the unbelievers in Israel:

Read Jeremiah 9:3, 5-6.

Turn to Romans 1.

Unbelief is not passive, but active. No one—*no one*—can claim ignorance of God, as Paul details in this letter.

Read Romans 1:18-21.

And while it is true that there *may* remain the odd tribe of jungle natives that has not heard of Jesus Christ, no one in civilized society can claim they do not know of Him. Everyone knows *of* Christ, so if they do not know *Him*, it is a willful rejection of Him. Consequently, when Christ returns in righteous judgment at the end of the Tribulation “with His mighty angels in flaming fire,” there will, quite literally, be hell to pay.

These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction,

pay the penalty^{NASB}, be punished^{KJV5, NIV}, suffer the punishment^{ESV} = *dike n tisousin* = to pay a price by suffering a penalty handed down in righteous, self-evident judgment.

Just what does Paul mean by “eternal destruction”? An eternity of torture? An eternity of being killed, then revived, then killed again? If we look at the words, “eternal” means perpetual, everlasting; the word translated “destruction” is *olethron*, and a little more tricky. The *intensive* form of this word, *exoletreuo*, means to destroy utterly, annihilate. But the word in our text can also mean ruin, or to have something taken away from one—which ties into the definition Paul supplies himself.

away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

Read Matthew 27:45-46.

Jesus suffered many things on the cross: the mental pain of seeing those He loved and was dying for, gleefully taunt and mock Him; the physical torture and agony of crucifixion, which killed slowly by asphyxiation; the agonizing weight of the world’s sin. But I propose that the very worst of it for Him, the most agonizing torture of all, was when the Father turned His back on Him. Nothing man could do to Jesus could approach the pain of being, even for a moment, deserted by His Father.

And that is the verdict reserved in our text for those who have rejected God and His Christ; that is the penalty they must pay: estrangement from God the Father and the Son.

These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

We usually imagine that the worst of hell will be the physical and mental suffering from its conditions, but Jesus repeatedly emphasized that the worst aspect of perdition will be its alienation from God and His Christ.

Read Matthew 8:11-12.

(i.e., while the banquet will include—surprisingly to the Jews—many Gentiles, excluded—again, surprisingly to the Jews—will be many sons of Abraham; they will be “cast out” from the presence of the Lord.)

By contrast, Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians wrote,

Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

v10

Verse 10 continues the sentence begun in v9, with an interesting turn of phrase.

Read v10.

Jesus will return in judgment, to separate the wheat from the chaff, the goats from the sheep. He also comes “to be glorified in His saints.” Just what does Paul mean by this? As usual not everyone agrees, based mostly on their eschatological position; your position on the events of the end times will by necessity dictate where and when you place the events of v10. (see chart on next page)

Since v10 is a continuation of the sentence begun in v9 (in the KJV the sentence begins with v1), and since v9 speaks of God visiting His wrath on those who do not know Him, v10 falls into the same time frame (“when”). Those who subscribe to the *pretribulational premillennial* position must then place this at Christ’s *second* return, since His first return (the Rapture, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) will not include judgment.

This, then, influences our interpretation of Christ coming to be “glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.” Our point in time is seven years after the Rapture; on earth there has been a seven-year Tribulation, and now Christ returns with His angels to judge the world. He spoke of it Himself.

Read Matthew 25:31-33.

This moment takes place at the end of the Tribulation, and inaugurates the Millennium, when Christ will reign on earth for one thousand years. Thus, the “saints” referred to in v10 come from two groups:

1. those who had been part of the Rapture, seven years earlier, either raised from the grave or “raptured” while still living; they will return to the earth with Christ and His angels;
2. those who lost their lives for Christ during the Tribulation, and have just been resurrected to life, as well as those who were converted to faith in Christ during the Tribulation, but were not martyred.

to be glorified in His saints

Along with His judgment, our text specifies two more things that will take place upon His return. We can safely read two meanings into this phrase, which Lange describes well.

Lange: To be glorified in His saints does not mean simply to be praised by or among them in words, but to be actually shown to be glorious in the glory that He effects in them, by letting His glory appear in the glorification of His saints, by dwelling in them, and imparting Himself to them.

and to be marveled at among all who have believed

The second thing that will occur when Christ returns is that He will “be marveled at” by all the saints. And speaking of “marvel,” listen to how Charles Haddon Spurgeon marvelously describes this.

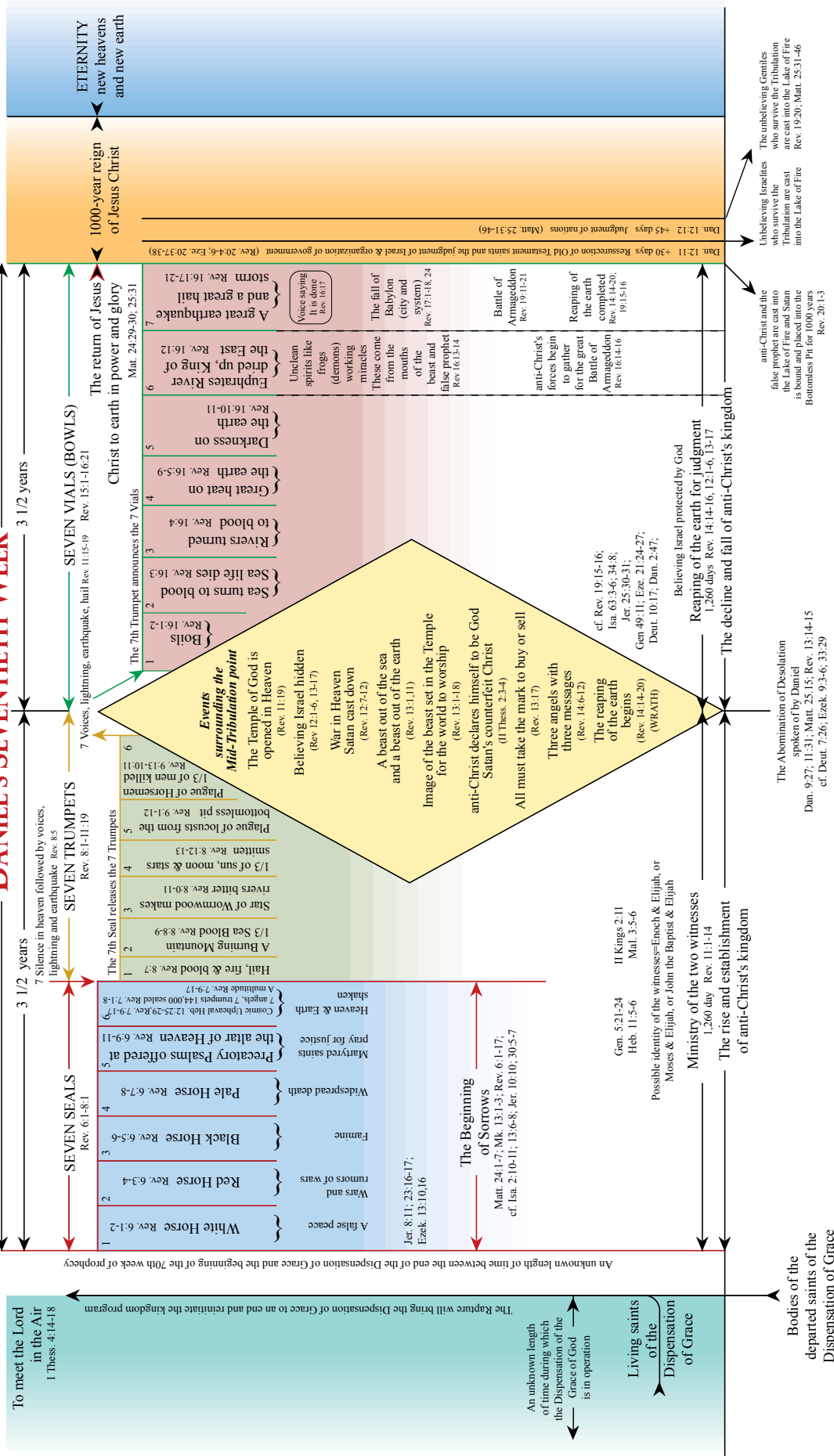
Spurgeon: Those who look upon the saints will feel a sudden wonderment of sacred delight; they will be startled with the surprising glory of the Lord’s work in them; ‘We thought He would do great things, but this! This surpasseth conception!’ Every saint will be a wonder to himself. ‘I thought my bliss would be great, but not like this!’ All his brethren will be a wonder to the perfected believer. He will say, ‘I thought the saints would be perfect, but I never imagined such a transfiguration of excessive glory would be put upon each of them. I could not have imagined my Lord to be so good and gracious.’

—for our testimony to you was believed.

Paul closes this verse with a heartfelt word of encouragement, in so many words saying, “And you, too, will be there to marvel at the Lord, Thessalonians, because you believed the good news we delivered to you.”

DANIEL'S SEVENTIETH WEEK

(7 YEARS)



Dr. W. Island Heide
 10000 Hwy 100, Suite 100
 P.O. Box 40, Germantown, WI 53022

Graphic design by Christine Mulholland

SESSION 36: A PRAYER FOR MANIFEST GLORY

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

PREFACE

I confess that what I do not understand about prayer could fill the Library of Congress. Much of what I say in my own prayers is said out of obedience and faith, not from understanding. Try as I might—to read and research and study the topic of prayer in the life of a believer—I freely confess that much about prayer remains a mystery to me. Nevertheless I continue to pray for at least three reasons:

1. **God's word tells us to;** Paul told the Ephesians,
With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, (Ephesians 6:18). He tells the Thessalonians near the end of his first letter to “pray without ceasing” (5:17). Beyond that, God's word is filled with instruction on *how* to pray, and how *not* to pray.
2. **There is an impulse in me, an impulse surely generated by the Holy Spirit, to pray.** I want to; most of the time the impulse to pray seems perfectly natural, and good.
3. **It has been my experience that God answers prayer,** so I know that it can be effective.

Even so, there are times, during prayer, that I wonder, *Why am I doing this? God already knows the situation, as well as what He is going to do about it, if anything. So why does He want me to pray about it?*

The reasons for prayer can be especially challenging when we pray, or are told to pray, for something we *know* God is going to do, because His word tells us He is going to do it. Paul has done this a couple of times in Thessalonians already.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23.

All of this brings us to our passage for today, which is Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians—a prayer for something *he has just told them is going to happen*. We know going in that this is not an outlier for Paul; we have just read two other examples of him doing this.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12.

vv11

To this end also we pray for you always

In our last session the beginning of v9 pointed back to the previous verse. This time the beginning of v11 points forward—sort of. Paul's prayer in these two verses is easily organized into what, why, and how:

what: that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power,

why: so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him,

how: according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“To this end” (Therefore, Wherefore, With this in mind) refers forward to the content of vv11-12. The portion that points *backward* is “your calling” (this calling^{KJV}, his calling^{NIV, ESV})—which refers not just to our being called to salvation, but to our call to be the recipients of His glory in the day of Christ's return (v10), also *forward* to v12.

What

that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power,

In the NASB and KJVs it is easy to miss the fact that God is really the one that does this.

ESV: that **our God** may **make you** worthy of his calling and **[that he]** may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by **his** power, (emphasis added)

The ESV is the only one of our common translations that uses “*make you worthy*” instead of “*count you worthy*.” The ESV is handy as a reminder that it is God working out all this in the Christian’s life, but “count” is really the better translation.

count, make = *axio* o (axe-ee-ah’-oh)= from <G514> (axios); **to deem entitled or fit** :- desire, think good, count (think) worthy.

We saw the intensified form of this word in v5:

This is a plain indication of God’s righteous judgment so that you will be **considered worthy** of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

When we looked at that I quoted David Guzik.

The idea behind counted worthy is not “seen as worthy” but “reckoned as worthy” as in a judicial decree. Paul’s prayer is that the worthiness of Jesus may be accounted to them.

Now, as then, we are not “counted worthy” because we have behaved the correct way, done the correct things; that is, we have not *earned* our worthiness. Rather, our behavior and deeds demonstrate that we are indeed, *in Christ*, worthy of our (His) calling.

Again, note that God Himself is the one who makes all this happen.

The Message (paraphrase): ...pray that our God will make you fit for what he’s called you to be, pray that he’ll fill your good ideas and acts of faith with his own energy so that it all amounts to something.

But again, this raises the question: If God is going to do this, why is Paul praying “always” for it to happen? And I wonder if a verse in Ephesians might give us some help with this—a verse that says much the same thing, but in a slightly different way.

Read Ephesians 4:1.

The word translated “worthy” in this verse is the adverb form of the root of the same word in our text. Here it means “appropriately, as becometh, after a godly sort.” Here the emphasis seems to be (with admittedly fractured grammar), *behave as who you have been called to be*, or more to the point, *behave as who you are*.

There is a certain level of personal responsibility to our being “counted worthy.” We are called not just to *be* a Christian, but to *behave* as a Christian. There is, as well we may note, an uncertainty as to how and when the Lord will accomplish this.

Ultimately, however, the reason for these kinds of prayers for preordained events or conditions, falls into the same category as our other prayers: **The purpose of our prayers is more horizontal than vertical.** For example, if I pray for the healing of a brother or sister in Christ, am I informing God of something of which He was unaware? No. Am I expecting to exert undo influence of His sovereign will in the matter? No; in fact, my prayer may even include, “Thy will be done” which not only blunts my specific request for healing, but, once again, prays for something that *will* happen. Of course His will will be done!

The vertical impact of our prayers is often unknown and remains a mystery. But the *horizontal* impact of our prayers is not just known, but immediate. Our prayer for a brother or sister in Christ strengthens our bond with them, and our bond with the church, our family. Absent our prayers on their behalf, our heart would turn cold and stony toward them. Our prayers nurture the fellowship we have with each other.

Along with the horizontal benefit to prayer, there is one very important vertical benefit: Every one of our prayers—be they entreaty, thanksgiving, praise or worship—reinforce and refresh our submission before a holy God. They remind us that He is God and we are not.

So too, perhaps, are prayers such as Paul voices for conditions and events that are certain to occur: they are reminders of our faith and dependency on God, and the bond we have with Him through the blood and grace and mercy of Christ Jesus. Isn't Paul's prayer that God will "fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power" ultimately less about, "Lord God, I sure hope this happens," than "Lord God, thank you for this reminder of Your sovereign rule over our lives."

v12

Why

so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him,

Verse 12 also looks back to v10. In v10 Paul describes the moment "when [Jesus] comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed."

He will come in power and majesty, and bathed in and surrounded by the fullness of His glory. It will truly be something to steal the breath away. The last time He appeared so before humans was on the mount of Transfiguration before only three of His disciples ([Peter, James and John](#)). If we were alive and standing there in that moment of His return we would have no earthly comparison for the sight. Happily, those in Christ today will experience this from the *opposite* direction—not from earth looking up, but from the skies looking down. And those of us accompanying Him will indeed have a comparison for this glory, since we will have been living in its midst in heaven.

But His glory will not be the "what," but the "why"—"so that the name of our Lord Jesus [[that is, everything that is the Christ; His "name" is just another way to refer to the fullness of Him](#)] will be glorified [[splendid, noble, gorgeous, honorable](#)] in you." Believers on earth today are indeed "in Christ" and He is in us. But like Jesus while He was on earth, we are not yet "glorified."

Read John 7:37-39.

Those believers who are there to see Him return at the end of the Tribulation will see the Son of Man in His true glorious state, and, as we discussed in the last session, part of that glory, or one aspect of that glory, will be *realized* in His followers.

How

according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

By the grace of our God and His Son, we will be—and, indeed in measure, we already have been—glorified in Christ. As it has been said, we are the only Jesus some will ever see. Because we are in Him, because we are glorified in Him—this is the "how"—we display Him, we manifest Him to a fallen world.

Pastor Funcke: It has often been said that the Christian virtues are only impressions of the image of Christ; and that is true and good; but these impressions must find expression in everyday life. We are called of God to make manifest the character of "Him that loved us." Once, in a large company of Christian men, the most lively regret was expressed that there is no authentic portrait of Jesus Christ as he lived and walked upon this earth. How gladly, it was said, would Christians often look on the features of that face! But one of God's aged pilgrims stood up and said, "I cannot deplore that at all, because a true Christian is the true likeness of Christ."

SESSION 37: SHAKEN MINDS AND BAD INFORMATION

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2

PREFACE

One reason I so enjoy reading history, which includes biographies, is that it gives one *perspective*. Reading and studying God's word has the same benefit: a sound perspective on this world and living in it.

We live in a time of alarming shortsightedness; most people—especially the young—imagine the world began the day they were born, and if they do not literally think that, they behave and think as if it were true.

One phenomenon of this malady is the erroneous perception that “things have never been so bad.” Whether it is economics, the value of a dollar, or morality, or politics one can always hear someone declaring, “It’s never been this bad before.” The truth is, as Solomon pointed out, “there is nothing new under the sun” ([Ecclesiastes 1:9](#)). Things have, indeed, been this bad before—in fact, in most cases they have been far worse.

Another part of this is more personal; ignorant of history, the individual—and again, especially the young—having only themselves as a yardstick, inflate every encumbrance, every challenge or inconvenience into something more dire than it is. This feeds into our day’s favorite malady of “stress,” as in “I’m so stressed.”

History gives us perspective. You want to talk about stress? How about

- a soldier during the first world war crouched against the ladder that will take him up out of the relative safety of the trench into the murderous machine gun fire of the enemy. He waits for the signal of his commander’s whistle, that will almost surely be prelude to his being killed. *That’s stress.*
- Or today’s soldier, already sweating under the load of his gear in the desert heat, ready to enter a dwelling where he may discover an innocent family gathered around their meal—or a nest of murderous terrorists.
- Or think of a wife and mother during the second world war. Her young husband has been overseas for one or two years in the thick of the fighting. No e-mail, no Skype, no telephone calls, and no leave; her only contact with him for all this time has been the occasional letter hastily scrawled from the battlefield. Meanwhile, she must work in a factory during the day, and take care of her children at night—all the while living in dreadful fear of the knock on the door by the Western Union man.

That’s stress.

As the modern, civilized world has become more wealthy and comfortable, we have been forced to invent our own stress, dumbing it down to the point at which someone in a different time or place would consider such “stress” a holiday on the beach.

One of the primary factors for such skewed perspective is ignorance and bad information—which brings us to the Thessalonians. In Chapter Two of his second letter to them Paul must give evidence to set them straight from the bad information they have heard from “a [disturbing] spirit or a message or a letter as if from us.” Like some today, they, too, considered their trials and affliction so bad that they began to think they were already *experiencing* the Tribulation—that that moment of the End Times had already arrived.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2.

v1

In v1 Paul sets the topic for what follows, in the process revealing the reason he must address it. The topic is, once again, the *parousia*—the coming, or presence of “our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him.”

Sidebar: Interesting that Paul puts it this way, choosing “gathering together” to describe the Rapture, instead of “caught up together,” which is how he put it in his first letter (4:17). The first (*harpazo*) is the image of being snatched, or plucked up from the earth, while the second (*episynagōgē*) describes an assembling, such as Christians for worship—which is how it is used in the letter to the Hebrews.

Read Hebrews 10:24-25.

Jesus used a form of the word in the gospel of Mark when He described His coming at the end of the Tribulation:

“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send forth the angels, and will **gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven.” (Mark 13:26-27; emphasis added)**

I find it somehow poetic that Christ gathering His people to glory is described using the same word for our gathering to worship Him on a Sunday morning.

Paul puts his counsel in the form of a “request,” which should not be interpreted as something sterile and detached. The word, *erotomen*, has some juice in it, translated in other settings as beg, implore, urge, intreat, beseech. We might paraphrase this, “*Please*, my brothers...” And just what is Paul requesting?

v2

That they disabuse themselves of the notion that the *parousia* has already occurred—that Christ has already come. Because he mentions it in v1, what Paul is addressing specifically is the Rapture, which is the inaugural event of the Day of the Lord. Let’s review what he has already told them.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

In the beginning of Chapter Five he describes the flip-side of Christ’s coming—the day of wrath that will follow the Rapture. And there he assures the believers in Thessalonica that they needn’t worry about that, because

...God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11)

And as we studied a few weeks ago, in this letter they will be reading that they can look forward to “relief” or “rest” from their afflictions when

...the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (1:7b-8)

They can also look forward not just to rescue, but sharing in Christ’s glory

when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed (1:10a)

...that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed

Since his first letter to them Paul had received word that they had probably been receiving some bad counsel. As Robert L. Thomas puts it,

[This] false instruction had denied them an imminent “rest.” They would first have to undergo the severe persecution of the tribulation and possibly even suffer martyrdom before Christ’s coming, according to these misrepresentations. They were even told that their current suffering indicated the arrival of the expected tribulation.

How did they get so off-course? Did they not understand Paul’s earlier teaching? Their confusion could have stemmed from either misunderstanding his teaching in the first place, or an immature understanding combined with his absence. We, with our handy printed Bible, can check our “authority” anytime we like. But the Thessalonians did not have that; if our authority has been a teacher and his spoken word only, then our understanding and memory may get a little hazy, and become easily shaken in his absence.

In such a state they would have been susceptible to (Paul suggests) some external source: a (bad) spirit, a word or written epistle from someone falsely claiming to be the apostle Paul. The evidence seems to be that that is what happened. Now, if not their fundamental faith, at least their understanding of God’s redemptive timeline was truly

shaken, agitated. The KJVs and ESV have the more literal translation: “shaken in mind.”

Adam Clarke: The word to be shaken, signifies to be agitated as a ship at sea in a storm, and strongly marks the confusion and distress which the Thessalonians had felt in their false apprehension of this coming of Christ.

either by a spirit

The NIV probably interprets this correctly, assuming that Paul speaks not of some luminous, disembodied apparition (*pneuma*), but by “prophetic utterances of individuals in Christian assemblies, claiming the authority of divine revelations” (Vincent).

Young believers of any age, less familiar with the substantive truth of Christ, can be easily led astray by someone claiming the authority they do not have—which is why Paul counsels that young believers are not to be placed in positions of authority within the church. They are not just unschooled in God’s economy, but they can have their heads turned; as Paul wrote to Timothy, this can cause them to “become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil” (1 Timothy 3:7)—a fearful contemplation indeed.

or a message

This (*logos*)—again the KJVs and ESV interpret it literally as “word”—would be a word written or spoken, and, depending on the interpretation could mean

- teaching from a different person, speaking in opposition to Paul; or, applying “as if from us” to this as well,
- someone claiming to have a message from Paul that modifies what he had previously taught, or wrote in his first letter to them.

Either of these would effectively erode the groundwork Paul had laid in the church for the gospel of Christ.

or a letter as if from us,

Think the Mormons, or Jehovah’s Witnesses, who may knock on your door and entice you with the claim that they hold to the Bible as well—the only problem being *their* Bible has been altered to fit their skewed theology (JW translation of John 1:1, “and the Word was a God,” rather than “the Word was God.”) Anyone could show up claiming to have a new letter from Paul, an “addendum” to what he had earlier taught or written; how would they know it to be true? The best Paul could do was what he does at the end of this letter.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:17.

Let us not pass too quickly over this without appreciating the harm done both to the Thessalonian church and the apostle himself by this situation. Paul had made it clear—probably in person, but certainly in his first letter—that Christ would return to gather believers to Himself, thus sparing them from the tribulation that would commence immediately. This had filled them with comfort and assurance regarding any mention of “the Day of the Lord.” But then, in his absence and between letters, the Thessalonians had been led astray, thus losing their comfort and assurance.

Imagine being one of them, not just questioning the teaching of the apostle, but now trembling with fear over the possibility that Christ had already come *and left them behind* to suffer the Tribulation! Was it all for naught? Was Paul’s teaching all a sham? Imagine the helpless feeling Paul must have experienced, far away from them and seemingly impotent against the false teaching of some nearer the church. Appreciate his position, of having to not just evangelize and teach, but at the same time protect his “territory,” as it were.

to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

The combination of their ignorance of, and grounding in the truth, combined with this spurious information regarding the end times, resulted in the Thessalonians imagining that, in so many words, they had missed the train, and that their current afflictions meant that they were now in the midst of the actual Tribulation.

And Paul begins v3—you can almost *hear* him shouting—by upbraiding them with, “Let no one in any way deceive you!”

SESSION 38: THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS, PART ONE

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4

PREFACE

Correction: In our previous session I said that the “Day of the Lord” was essentially synonymous with the *parousia*—but that is not entirely correct. The *parousia* (“presence”) would include, but not be limited to, the Rapture, the first return of Christ. The “Day of the Lord” speaks primarily to the Lord’s return in vengeance and judgment—that is, His *second* coming at the end of the Tribulation. This distinction is important, especially as we consider this passage in the second letter.

MAN OF LAWLESSNESS

What we have before us, in verses 3-12, is a frightening prospect. It describes a period on earth of unimaginable anti-God fervor. Paul in this passage describes the Tribulation—specifically, the worst of it, the *Great Tribulation*, which is the last half of the seven-year Tribulation. This passage focuses on the rule of this 3½ year period by the individual referred to in Scripture as the “man of lawlessness (or sin),” “son of destruction (or perdition)” —that is, the “Antichrist,” who Lange refers to as “incarnate Sin” (as opposed to Christ, incarnate righteousness).

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

In our last session I described the Thessalonians at the time this letter was being written as feeling as if they had missed the Rapture train. Paul’s purpose in this passage (vv3-12) is to describe what will follow the Rapture of the church—the taking up of all Christians, alive and dead, everywhere on earth, to heaven with the Lord—thus proving to them that since it has not yet occurred, they had *not* missed the train. To wit (working backward),

- if the Day of the Lord has not come, then the “man of lawlessness” has not yet been revealed;
- if the man of lawlessness has not yet been revealed, then the *Great Tribulation* has not yet begun;
- if the Rapture has not yet occurred, then the Tribulation has not begun;
- if believers are still on earth, then the Rapture has not yet occurred; thus,
- *you have not missed the train!*

In this Part One ([a shortened session](#)), we’re going to back off and look at the forest, the lay of the land, before we examine in the subsequent sessions the individual trees: the details of the text.

[Refer to chart on page 139.](#)

We will not be discussing all the fine details included in this chart, because they are not discussed in our text. But the chart, which is made available by the *Berean Bible Institute*, does an excellent job of illustrating the sequence and details of the End Times, from this present church period of grace through to the Millennium and the Eternal State. There may be a few of the finer details in the chart regarding the seals and trumpets and bowls during the Tribulation that could be argued, but overall this is a good road map for the End Times from the pretribulational / premillennial position. You will want to keep it handy as we proceed through this second chapter.

THE CHURCH AGE

Beginning on the left, the graded blue area represents the Church Age—which the chart refers to as the period of the *Dispensation of Grace*. That is, during this period from Christ on earth to the present day (and beyond, if the Lord tarries) the church has been established and operative, the gospel has been preached beyond the church, and the grace of God in Christ has been operational (“dispensed”). In the context of the End Times, God’s grace has been evident because He has withheld His judgment.

[Turn to Exodus 34.](#)

God’s grace and longsuffering regarding sin did not begin with Christ; though we may not refer to it as the “Church Age,” from the very beginning Yahweh showed grace and patience toward sinful man. After Moses requested that

he be allowed to see Yahweh's glory, the Lord told Moses that He would "make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you," but Moses could not look upon His face. When the Lord passed before him He proclaimed who and what He was.

Read Exodus 34:5-7.

The apostle Peter spoke of this in his second epistle.

But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:7-9)

THE RAPTURE

On our chart, what to us is considered a momentous event is represented simply as a thin line at the right edge of the Church Age, ending in an upward pointing arrow. This is when what Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 occurs; this is when all believers, living and dead, will be supernaturally removed from the earth to heaven. The thin line faithfully illustrates, if not its importance to man, the supposed *brevity* of this event, which will occur in the "twinkling of an eye."

THE SEVENTIETH WEEK: THE TRIBULATION

The terminology of some prophecy can be, admittedly, confusing. Not least is this reference to "weeks," as in the prophet Daniel's "seventy weeks" in Daniel 9. **(Note: In this session we are just taking a glance at the overall picture; we will return for the pertinent details. Remember, too, that ours is not a study of the entire End Times, but a study of what Paul mentions about it in the Thessalonian letters.)**

Read Daniel 9:24-27

The word translated "weeks" in Daniel (the Hebrew *shabua*; literally, "sevened") simply means a set or unit of seven. In our vernacular, a "week" is a set of seven *days*, and this word could refer to a set of days in the Bible. But it can also refer to *years*, as it does here. So Daniel speaks of seventy sets of seven years—i.e., 70 years x 7 = 490 years. Verse 27 in Daniel 9, using "one week" for seven years, describes what our chart calls "Daniel's Seventieth Week." So, harmonizing v27 with our chart,

"And he [the "prince who is to come"] will make a firm covenant with the many for one week,

Israel will embrace this prince (i.e., not royalty, but a strong leader) as a political messiah, if not the literal Messiah (John 5:43). This is the start of the final, the seventieth week of this prophecy, represented in the chart by the far left, red line. From this point to the mid-point, three and one half years later, this prince—the "man of lawlessness," the Antichrist—will be gathering his forces, not yet in control, but making his plans.

but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering;

The "middle of the week" is the middle of seven years—after three and one half years—represented in the middle of the chart where the yellow diamond is located. This is when the dark prince goes public, declares himself as one to be worshiped.

and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate."

During the last half of the seventieth week, the Antichrist will wreak havoc—but it will also be the time of his decline, and his doom is set. The green line on the chart marks the end of the seventieth week—the end of the Tribulation—and the triumphant return of Christ to judge the world.

THE MILLENNIUM AND ETERNAL STATE

The graded yellow to the right represents the 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth—the Millennium—and the graded blue at the far right represents the eternal state of the “new heaven and new earth.”

In this abbreviated session we have just looked at the overall context for the Tribulation; we have considered the forest, instead of the individual trees. In our next session we will return to our Thessalonian passage to examine the details of what Paul writes about this “man of lawlessness.”

SESSION 39: THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS, PART TWO: APOSTASY

2 Thessalonians 2:3a

PREFACE

In our previous session we surveyed the big picture of the end times, using the handout as a guide. With this session we begin digging into the details. But, once more, a reminder: Our purpose here is not a detailed study of the end times, but to understand what Paul writes about it to the Thessalonians.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4.

v3

Let no one in any way deceive you...

The word translated “deceive” does not just refer to someone fibbing to them, telling an untruth about the end times. It is deeper than that.

deceive = *exapatao* = from <G1537> (ek) and <G538> (apatao); **to seduce wholly** :- beguile, deceive; **leading astray**.

Robertson: It is amazing how gullible some of the saints are when a new deceiver pulls off some stunts in religion.

(For) it/that day will not come,

Though it is not in the original Greek, every one of our standard translations inserts a form of this. This is because scholars understand that the original ellipsis (i.e., words left out or, as here, implied) is a common way for Paul to write. Paul speaks of two events that must take place before The Day of the Lord will occur—not the Rapture, but Christ’s coming in vengeance and judgment.

unless the apostasy/falling away/rebellion comes first

apostasy = *apostasia* = feminine of the same as <G647> (apostasion); **defection from truth** (properly the state) [“apostasy”] :- **falling away, forsake**; revolt.

Throughout history there have been many periods of apostasy, many “fallings away.” But what Paul refers to here is not just another like those that have come before—that is, not *an* apostasy, but *the* apostasy, *the* rebellion—one which will throw into shadow all that have come before.

And, predictably, whenever the word “apostasy” comes up, we wonder, “Does this mean that a Christian can lose his or her salvation by becoming an apostate?” There are those, of course, who believe that is possible—that a true Christian *can* lose his faith. Especially now, in the midst of Pastor Jeremy’s series on election and predestination, we are reminded that there are plenty of Scripture passages that teach otherwise. Let’s look at just one.

Read John 10:24-30.

But perhaps the best evidence against true Christians being a part of this apostasy is that all of them have just left!

Robert L. Thomas describes this apostasy as “a deliberate abandonment of a former professed position.” There are in every church—yes, even this one—individuals who by all appearances are devout Christians but, sadly, are not. When one thinks about it, this is one of the saddest tragedies in Christendom: that so many would dwell so closely, for such a long time, to truth, yet ultimately reject it. These are the apostates, those who have proclaimed Christ publicly, who have been considered sheep in His fold, but who—in their heart—have never bowed before Him as Lord and Savior. They, some for most of their lives, have lived a lie—even perhaps lying to themselves. Paul, in his second letter to Timothy describes such individuals.

Read 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

There is a proclivity to see the events of the end times as linear, orderly, one event preceding the next, that event proceeded by the next—all like ranks of soldiers marching one after the other: one ends, the next begins, etc., almost as if each event is discreet, disengaged from the next. But that is not how the end times will flow.

There remains the phenomenon of *cause and effect*, even during the supernatural events of the end times. One event will bring about the next, and, occasionally, there will be some overlap. This means that during this period things will not be as neat and orderly as we might imagine. At the same time, this means that it is all of a package; looking at it as a drama, these events would all be acts within the same play, not separate plays. In a play, Act One sets up Act Two, etc., leading to the climax.

This is important to remember because many scholars have wasted a lot of ink and paper fitting these events—specifically, the apostasy and the emergence of Antichrist—into human history. For example, there is a substantial contingent claiming that the Antichrist refers to the pope—especially some of history’s most hideous examples of those who have donned the robes and sat in that chair. Even in this age of a heightened level of depravity, the behavior of some of these popes would cause even Bill Clinton to blush.

Albert Barnes (who favors this interpretation): Pope John II, was publicly charged at Rome with incest. Pope John XIII usurped the Pontificate, spent his time in hunting, in lasciviousness, and monstrous forms of vice; he fled from the trial to which he was summoned, and was stabbed, being taken in the act of adultery. Pope Sixtus IV licensed brothels at Rome. Pope Alexander VI was, as a Roman Catholic historian says, “one of the greatest and most horrible monsters in nature that could scandalize the holy chair. His beastly morals, his immense ambition, his insatiable avarice, his detestable cruelty, his furious lusts, and monstrous incest with his daughter Lucretia, are, at large, described by Guicciardini Ciaconius, and other authentic papal historians.” Of the popes, Platina (a Roman Catholic) says: “The chair of Saint Peter was usurped, rather than possessed, by monsters of wickedness, ambition, and bribery. They left no wickedness unpracticed.”

We could go on, for example history gives us figures such as Caligula, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, etc. But all these, including the papacy, can be dispensed with easily. The prophecy of the end times is remarkably precise and substantiated by multiple writers of Scripture (Daniel, Paul, John). It is sequential and all of a piece: one event follows another. Over one seven-year period there will be the Rapture, the apostasy, the revelation and rule of the Antichrist, and Christ’s return in judgment. Since the totality of that sequence has not yet occurred, *none* of it has.

So, here is not just the time line, but the sequential cause and effect:

The Rapture

In “the twinkling of an eye” the Rapture will occur, removing the church—all true Christians—from the earth. Just think about that for a moment: every last follower of Christ, world-wide, gone. Not one left. Churches—*most* churches—left without pastors and shepherds; many families entirely gone, or decimated; Christian institutions left rudderless—or empty; no witness for Christ left on earth. What will be the effect of this?

The Tribulation, Part One

Two camps will be created in a relatively short period of time: those who, as a result of the Rapture, turn *to* God, and those who, for the same reason, turn *against* God. Scripture indicates that the latter will predominate. This will be period of profound evil and supernatural turbulence.

Imagine that the Rapture occurs on a Sunday morning, during the worship service of your average, mid-sized evangelical church—and you are a fly on the wall observing everything that transpires. In a flash most of the congregation disappears, but some are left. Seated there are individuals who most thought were believers but, in fact, were not. With some variation, they will have one of two reactions:

- Some left behind, who sincerely *thought they were* Christians, or who had been procrastinating, figuring they had plenty of time to decide *but were moving in that direction*, will be cut to the quick. They will immediately understand what has just occurred, and will fall down before the Lord in authentic submission and belief.
- Others left behind, who sincerely *thought they were* Christians, or who had been procrastinating, figuring they had plenty of time to decide, or *who knew in their heart they were living a lie in the church*—these will be

hurt and angered, feeling that Christ has rejected them (whereas, in fact, *they* are the ones who have rejected Christ). These are the apostates; these are the ones who inaugurate a period of hatred against God and His Son like no other in history. These are the ones who will make life miserable on earth for just about everyone for the next seven years.

But we cannot forget about those who will turn to Christ, rather than against Him, after the Rapture. They will have lost their shepherds, but everything those shepherds and leaders produced will remain:

- the writings of Spurgeon, A. W. Tozer, C. S. Lewis, J.I. Packer, John Piper, Dwight L. Moody, Jonathan Edwards, Warren Wiersbe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Chuck Colson, Philip Yancey, John and Charles Wesley;
- videotapes of Billy Graham crusades, CDs and DVDs of Chuck Swindoll, R. C. Sproul;
- commentaries by Matthew Henry, MacLaren, Scofield, F. F. Bruce, Gordon Fee, Donald Barnhouse, D. A. Carson, James Montgomery Boice;
- all the hymnals left in suddenly vacant pews; and
- every Bible translation from the Septuagint to the ESV.

All this and more will be left behind—including the Internet, or some future means of world-wide distribution—which means that even though they have lost their shepherds and leaders, they will not have lost vital information for the maturing of their faith. And they will need all the help they can get.

Read Matthew 24:9-13.

These apostates—knowingly or in ignorance—will lay the groundwork, the foundation for what will happen in three and a half years. They will comprise *hoi polloi*—"the masses"—who set the stage for the revealing of the "man of lawlessness. A man of brilliant evil, he will take the pulse of this groundswell and know that this is his moment, his time to strike. The apostasy will both inspire and then support his campaign of evil, and because of them the world will truly never be the same.

Lange: In all history there exists a reciprocity of action between the actual movement of the time and the achievements of an energetic personality. For every historical individual there is a thousand-fold work of preparation, and he makes his appearance not otherwise than as a child of his age. And again the drift of the time only reaches an irresistible supremacy, when one man conceives the spirit of the time at its height, with bold grasp brings to bear what is fermenting half obscurely in a thousand minds, and so stamps the age with his seal. He can do it, if he has the courage—after all, it will be the effrontery—to express and carry out what is in a thousand hearts. Those who were his forerunners then become his servants and helpers.

PREFACE

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4.

v3

Paul says that Christ will not return in judgment until these two events occur: the apostasy and the revealing of the “man of lawlessness.” In our last session we saw the beginning of the seven-year Tribulation with the great apostasy—the inception of a period of profound rebellion and falling away from God and His Christ—and how this will set the stage, lay the groundwork for the individual described by Paul as the

- man of lawlessness (NASB, NIV & ESV)
- man of sin (KJVs)

and

- son of destruction (NASB & ESV)
- man doomed to destruction (NIV)
- son of perdition (KJVs)

In **vv6-7** Paul describes the mechanics behind his rise to power and public revelation—that is, how it was orchestrated supernaturally; in **vv8-10** he describes the man’s deceptive methods—and his end; in **vv11-12**, the mechanics behind his success with the masses—again, orchestrated supernaturally; **in this passage** Paul gives us the man’s description and behavior.

Last week I described the events from the Rapture to the Millennium as not individual plays, but acts within one play—that is, one act sets up the next. If the Tribulation is a two-act play, this moment Paul describes will be the dramatic climax at the end of the first act. All of the first act has been setting the stage for, slowly building up to this moment, when the “hero” of the story takes center stage in all his glory. The curtain drops for the intermission—except in this play there is no intermission, no moment of relaxation with wine and cheese before a return to the story. And when the curtain rises on the second act, the hero begins his ultimate descent into failure and loss and ignominious death.

lawlessness, sin = *anomia* = from <G459> (anomos); **illegality**, i.e. violation of law or (genitive) **wickedness** :- **iniquity**, × transgress (-ion of) the law, **unrighteousness**.

Once in a while in our life we may have come across someone with this quality—not just one who breaks the law occasionally, but one with utter disregard for the law, whether legal or moral. This person seems to have no conscience, no sense of shame or regret. Here is the picture of the ultimate, self-indulgent narcissist, caring nothing about anyone but his own desires and pleasure.

destruction, perdition = *apoleia* (ap-o’-lee-a) = from a presumed derivative of (apollumi); **ruin or loss (physical, spiritual or eternal)** :- damnable (-nation), destruction, die, **perdition**, perish, pernicious ways, **waste**.

It is important to note that this word does not refer to *extinction*—utter annihilation. That is, the word refers to a “loss of well-being,” rather than a loss of existence (that would be the word *olethros*). And as we see in the NIV, this description of the “man of lawlessness” as also “son of destruction” can be interpreted two ways:

- In the NT, to refer to someone as a “son” means that this person *behaves* like the father; when I was a young boy, and an adult of my dad’s generation and acquaintance observed me doing something like my dad, he would remark, “You are your dad’s son,” meaning not so much that I sprang from his loins, but that I was growing up with his qualities. I was behaving like him. Here this son of destruction or perdition is one who *behaves* like his father: Satan. And this behavior will bring everlasting destruction, perdition on countless millions during this time of tribulation.

- But this also means (as the NIV points out) that this man is doomed to destruction, perdition; his end is sure: the lake of fire for all eternity.
Loss of well-being indeed.

The Antichrist

The apostle John is the only one in Scripture to use the word *Antichristos*—our word Antichrist (against or an opponent of the Messiah, or it can also mean the *opposite* or “instead of” Messiah [more on this in a moment]); this is a direct transliteration of the Greek. John uses the term specifically, to refer to the one person of the Tribulation, as well as generally, to refer to anyone who speaks or acts against Christ.

Read 1 John 2:18.

In the fourth chapter he speaks of the *spirit* of the Antichrist.

Read 1 John 4:2-3

As we saw in our previous session, many believe that the Antichrist is more a group, or philosophy, or system, or a series of individuals such as the papacy. But that is contradicted by Paul, the prophet Daniel, and even Jesus Himself. Daniel offers a fulsome description of this son of perdition as an individual.

Read Daniel 8:23-25.

To the Jewish leaders Jesus said,

“I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him.” (John 5:43)

Scripture seems clear that the Antichrist will be an *individual* who will come to prominence during the yet-future Tribulation. And he will be evil incarnate. It’s not enough to just say he will be bad; just as this will be *the* Tribulation—like no other—this will be *the* Antichrist—the embodiment of every evil against Christ Jesus. But note: this doesn’t mean that he will be *seen as* evil. Remember who his “father” is:

Read 2 Corinthians 11:13-15.

Here is David Guzik on this:

The Antichrist is the “opposite Jesus”; he is the “instead of” Jesus. Most people have focused on the idea of the “opposite Jesus.” This has made them think that the Antichrist will appear as a supremely evil person, that as much as Jesus went around doing good, he will go around doing bad. As much as Jesus’ character and personality was beautiful and attractive, the Antichrist’s character and personality will be ugly and repulsive. As much as Jesus spoke only truth, the Antichrist will speak only lies. This emphasizes the idea of the “opposite Jesus” too much. The Antichrist will instead be more of an “instead of Jesus.” He will look wonderful, be charming and successful. He will be the ultimate winner, and appear as an angel of light. In this sense the Antichrist will be a satanic messiah, instead of the true Messiah Jesus Christ.

Without at all suggesting equivalency, note how this man and the various other roles in this situation are a dark, mirror image of the original:

Holiness	Evil
God the Father	Satan
Holy Spirit	spirit of the Antichrist
Christ Jesus	the Antichrist, son of perdition
heaven	hell, perdition

There are other similarities between this “man of lawlessness” and Jesus—Antichrist and *the* Christ. (from Guzik)

Both Jesus and the man of sin have a “coming” (or presence = *parousia*)

**2 Thessalonians 2:1 and
2 Thessalonians 2:9**

Both Jesus and the man of sin have a “revealing”

**2 Thessalonians 1:7 and
2 Thessalonians 2:3**

Both Jesus and the man of sin have a “gospel” or message

2 Thessalonians 2:10-11

Both Jesus and the man of sin say that they alone should be worshiped

2 Thessalonians 2:4

Both Jesus and the man of sin have to support their claims with miraculous works

2 Thessalonians 2:9

The Beast

Finally, we have this man’s identification as “the beast.” There is more than one “beast” mentioned in the Revelation; most (but not all) identify the first “beast” of Revelation 13 as the Antichrist. Note: the “dragon” is Satan.

Read Revelation 13:1-9.

SESSION 41: THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS, PART FOUR: HUBRIS

2 Thessalonians 2:4-5

PREFACE

Webster's defines the word "hubris" thus: "wanton insolence or arrogance resulting from excessive pride or from passion." This is a perfect, if incomplete, description of the "man of lawlessness." Traditionally, in all of history, someone against one god would, instead, prefer another god. That will not be the case with this man of lawlessness. The "god" he will prefer will be himself.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:4-5.

v4

who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship

opposes = *antikeimenos* = from <G473> (anti) and <G2749> (keimai); **to lie opposite**, i.e. be adverse (figurative repugnant) to :- **adversary**, be contrary, oppose.

Note that the Antichrist is not an atheist. To "lie against" something one has to acknowledge there *is* something! Here is his hubris: this man does not say, *since there are no real gods, I'll be one*. No, he says, *out of all the supposed gods—and even the One who really is, I am better. You will worship only me*. This is captured in the second word.

exalts himself = *hyperairomenos* (hoop-er-eye'-roh-menos) = middle from <G5228> (hyper) and <G142> (airo); **to raise oneself over**, i.e. (figurative) to become haughty :- **exalt self, be exalted above measure**.

Before we get on our high horse and start throwing stones at this admittedly despicable individual, let us pause and turn our gaze inward, to draw some personal application.

Read Galatians 5:16-17.

Paul uses the same word from our text—*antikeimai* (opposes, opposition)—to describe the ongoing battle between our fleshly nature and the Holy Spirit. Last week we discussed how the "spirit of the Antichrist" is alive and well in the world today; I would go so far as to say that this same spirit is alive and well in each of us. Everyone not yet resurrected still has a part of themselves that "lies against" God, that is an adversary to the holiness and righteousness of God. And every time we say, "I don't have time to pray," or "I have something better to do than read my Bible," or "I don't feel like worshiping today"—every time we place our own desires above obedience and fealty to holy God, we are showing ourselves to be at least distant kin to the Antichrist.

In the book of 1 Maccabees, part of the inter-testamental apocryphal books not considered canon by protestants (but are by Catholics), we find the account of Antiochus Epiphanes, whom many believe is the historical (actual) Antichrist. There are, admittedly, many parallels between his behavior and that of the man of lawlessness. There are also parallels between this account (written in Hebrew by a Jew) and the Tribulation.

I would like to read portions of 1 Maccabees 1 from the Good News Translation (GNT), which is actually a paraphrase, rather than literal translation. It is a sad, even horrific, but fascinating story. As I read this, keep in mind that all of this transpires *after* the return of Israel and the rebuilding of the temple in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, but before the time of Christ Jesus.

8 After [the death of Alexander the Great], [his] generals took control, 9 and each had himself crowned king of his own territory. The descendants of these kings ruled for many generations and brought a great deal of misery on the world.

10 The wicked ruler Antiochus Epiphanes, son of King Antiochus the Third of Syria, was a descendant of one of Alexander's generals. Antiochus Epiphanes had been a hostage in Rome before he became king of Syria.

11 At that time there appeared in the land of Israel a group of traitorous Jews who had no regard for the Law and who had a bad influence on many of our people. They said, "Let's come to terms with the Gentiles, for our refusal to associate with them has brought us nothing but trouble." 12 This proposal appealed to many people, 13 and some of

them became so enthusiastic about it that they went to the king and received from him permission to follow Gentile customs. 14 They built in Jerusalem a stadium like those in the Greek cities. 15 They had surgery performed to hide their circumcision, abandoned the holy covenant, started associating with Gentiles, and did all sorts of other evil things.

20 ...after [his] conquest of Egypt, Antiochus marched with a great army against the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. 21 In his arrogance, he entered the Temple and took away the gold altar, the lampstand with all its equipment, 22 the table for the bread offered to the Lord, the cups and bowls, the gold fire pans, the curtain, and the crowns. He also stripped all the gold from the front of the Temple 23 and carried off the silver and gold and everything else of value, including all the treasures that he could find stored there. 24 Then he took it all to his own country. He had also murdered many people and boasted arrogantly about it. 25 There was great mourning everywhere in the land of Israel.

29 Two years later Antiochus sent a large army from Mysia[d] against the towns of Judea. When the soldiers entered Jerusalem, 30 their commander spoke to the people, offering them terms of peace and completely deceiving them. Then he suddenly launched a fierce attack on the city, dealing it a major blow and killing many of the people. 31 He plundered the city, set it on fire, and tore down its buildings and walls. 32 He and his army took the women and children as prisoners and seized the cattle.

Then Antiochus and his forces built high walls and strong towers in the area north of the Temple, turning it into a fort. This fort became a great threat to the city.

37 Innocent people were murdered around the altar;
the Holy Place was defiled by murderers.

38 The people of Jerusalem fled in fear,
and the city became a colony of foreigners.
Jerusalem was foreign to its own people,
who had been forced to abandon the city.

39 Her Temple was as empty as a wilderness;
her festivals were turned into days of mourning,
her Sabbath joy into shame.

Her honor became an object of ridicule.

40 Her shame was as great as her former glory,
and her pride was turned into deepest mourning.

41-43 Antiochus now issued a decree that all nations in his empire should abandon their own customs and become one people. All the Gentiles and even many of the Israelites submitted to this decree. They adopted the official pagan religion, offered sacrifices to idols, and no longer observed the Sabbath.

44 The king also sent messengers with a decree to Jerusalem and all the towns of Judea, ordering the people to follow customs that were foreign to the country. 45 He ordered them not to offer burnt offerings, grain offerings, or wine offerings in the Temple, and commanded them to treat Sabbaths and festivals as ordinary work days. 46 They were even ordered to defile the Temple and the holy things in it.[e] 47 They were commanded to build pagan altars, temples, and shrines, and to sacrifice pigs and other unclean animals there. 48 They were forbidden to circumcise their sons and were required to make themselves ritually unclean in every way they could, 49 so that they would forget the Law which the Lord had given through Moses and would disobey all its commands. 50 The penalty for disobeying the king's decree was death.

54 On the fifteenth day of the month of Kislev, King Antiochus set up The Awful Horror on the altar of the Temple, and pagan altars were built in the towns throughout Judea. 55 Pagan sacrifices were offered in front of houses and in the streets. 56 Any books of the Law which were found were torn up and burned, 57 and anyone who was caught with a copy of the sacred books or who obeyed the Law was put to death by order of the king. 58 Month after month these wicked people used their power against the Israelites caught in the towns.

59 On the twenty-fifth of the month, these same evil people offered sacrifices on the pagan altar erected on top of the altar in the Temple. 60 Mothers who had allowed their babies to be circumcised were put to death in accordance with the king's decree. 61 Their babies were hung around their necks, and their families and those who had circumcised them were put to death. 62 But many people in Israel firmly resisted the king's decree and refused to eat food that was ritually unclean. 63 They preferred to die rather than break the holy covenant and eat unclean food—and many did die. 64 In his anger God made Israel suffer terribly.

This story is historically true, but it is not, as some believe, an account of *the* Tribulation and *the* Antichrist. It is, rather, another example of prophetic “now, not yet.” It *foreshadows* the ultimate fulfillment of the literal Tribulation and Antichrist. Just as Melchizedek was a type of Christ, Antiochus was a type of the Antichrist.

Beyond that, note the time frame: It's understandable that one might conclude that Daniel's prophecy about the Antichrist was fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes, but that cannot be the case for what Jesus said about him roughly 200 years after the death of Antiochus, and the apostles Paul and John write about him, at least 220 years after his death. All these spoke of a *future* Antichrist.

so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

One cannot read this without raising the obvious: *there is no longer a temple standing in Jerusalem*. Maybe the word "temple" here just refers to the temple *precincts* (you might think), where the temple once stood. No, in secular Greek this word refers specifically to the dwelling place of the god.

temple = *naos* = from a primary *naio* (**to dwell**); a fane, shrine, temple :- **shrine**, temple. Compare <G2411> (*hieron*).

Paul would have used a different word (*hieron*) to refer to the collection of buildings comprising the temple precincts. The man of lawlessness will take his seat within the temple itself. One could interpret this as referring to the Most Holy Place—the Holy of Holies where only the ark of the covenant rested—in which case the Antichrist will place his throne in the spot where Yahweh in the cloud settled to speak with Moses. But if not there, at least in the Holy Place, the larger interior of the temple proper, where only the priesthood could go. Two references favor the latter.

Read Matthew 27:5.

Judas could not have been inside the Holy Place and thrown the silver into the Holy of Holies, so this must refer to throwing the money into the Holy Place from the exterior courtyard.

Read Matthew 27:51.

Since the veil was hung *between* the Most Holy Place and the Holy Place, "temple" here refers to the whole interior of the building. So my conclusion is that Paul in our text speaks of the man of lawlessness establishing his throne *somewhere* inside the temple building, and not necessarily in the Holy of Holies. This tells us that the Jerusalem temple will be rebuilt at some point in the future.

In another "now—not yet" prophecy, Isaiah offers us another picture of this. In a prophecy addressed to "the king of Babylon" but which many believe also describes the ultimate fall of Satan, we hear echoes, as well, of Satan's servant: the Antichrist.

Read Isaiah 14:12-19.

In our history there have been men who have, in smaller, more local ways, conspired to be like this. They did not always aspire to this; they probably began with honorable, righteous intentions, but ultimately they listened to the flesh more than the Spirit of God. Having success, they began to believe their own press clippings, they became more full of themselves than full of God.

Two come to mind: **David Koresh**, late leader of the *Branch Davidians* religious sect in the early 1990s, who believed himself to be its final prophet. He established himself as "god" over everyone in the sect. Then there was, in the 1970s, **Jim Jones**, who led the People's Temple, finally located in Jonestown, Guyana. Jones wielded total control over everyone in the cult, and ultimately ordered the poisoning of all its members, killing 918 men, women, and children.

Each of these men established himself as “father” of his people, having control over life and death. But these and others were faint reflections of the Antichrist.

- His “cult” will be worldwide;
- he will wield supernatural powers given to him by *his* father, Satan;
- he will establish his throne at the navel of the world: Jerusalem, and in the holiest spot on earth: the Jerusalem temple;
- he will be seen and lauded as the savior of the world;
- he will proclaim himself not just *a* god, but very God.

The man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, the Antichrist, will be a dark leader the likes of which the world has never seen, and he will reign over a period of *darkness* the likes of which the world has never seen.

v5

In v5 Paul complains to the Thessalonians about having to go back over this material.

Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? (2 Thessalonians 2:5)

In a similar vein I would suggest that it is to our own peril that we forget these past examples of such tyrants, how flesh has the power to convert apparent righteousness into evil—and that that evil is alive and well today, and will, to a hideous degree some time in the future, be in charge of the entire world’s system.

SESSION 42: THE SPIRIT AT WORK, PART ONE

2 Thessalonians 2:5-7

A FOLLOW-UP AND CLARIFICATION

In our last session I stated the following, regarding the Antichrist taking his seat in the Jerusalem temple:

All of this tells us two things: First, the Jerusalem temple will be rebuilt at some point in the future; Second, we need not be watching for the Rapture until it is, since the temple must be in place when that occurs—assuming, of course, that the temple will be substantially rebuilt; if only a tent, it could easily be accomplished during the first half of the Tribulation.

The statement just quoted, from our previous class, is that of someone who had no position on the “doctrine of imminence”—which is,

Imminence in relation to the rapture has been defined as consisting of three elements: “the certainty that He may come at any moment, the uncertainty of the time of that arrival, and the fact that no prophesied event stands between the believer and that hour.” (emphasis added; Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth About The Lord’s Return* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922), quoted in a paper by Thomas D. Ice, Liberty University.)

Your humble teacher had no strong opinion on the doctrine of imminence, because I had not, to-date, studied it; my statement in the previous class was based simply on the pragmatic need for a temple to be in place for the “man of lawlessness” to take it over, coupled with the fact that presently there *is* no temple in Jerusalem. Finally, I was of the opinion that our church held no official position on this—that it was not mentioned in this church’s *Statement of Faith*—about which I was in error.

ARTICLE XIV: THE BLESSED HOPE

We believe that **the next great event in the fulfillment of prophecy will be the coming of the Lord in the air** to receive to Himself into heaven both His own who are alive and remaining unto His coming, and also all who have fallen asleep in Jesus, and that this event is the blessed hope set before us in the Scripture, and **for this we should be constantly looking** (John 14:1-3; I Corinthians 15:51-52; Philippians 3:20; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Titus 2:11-14). [emphasis added]

So to summarize: While there remain many questions, even mysteries, about the timing of the temple’s construction in relation to the Rapture, it was incorrect of me to make the statement that “we need not be watching for the Rapture until it is, since the temple must be in place when that occurs.” What we should be watching for is Christ’s return—period.

I apologize for not sufficiently doing my homework on that point. My goal is always to be accurate and faithful to God’s word; failing that, my prayer is always that God would supply someone to challenge my mistake, so I am grateful to Mike for raising the issue during our last session.

PREFACE

A month ago we tabled the discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit during the Tribulation period until we got to v6. Well, we have finally arrived. And what a moment this is; here, once again, is one of those passages that, along with its supporting references, causes the student of God’s word to lean back in his chair and let the rich imagery and cosmic circumstances overwhelm the mind.

It is no secret in this room that Linda and I are fans of science fiction and fantasy films. The passage before us has within it some of the same fascinating qualities—supernatural, cosmic forces; world order in flux; the battle between good and evil—but with one critical difference: This is not fiction; there *will* come a day when this drama will play out precisely as described. This is not fantasy—but it is a real whiz-bang of a story!

Sidebar: The study and understanding of this passage requires all of us to, as my grade school teachers would say, put on our thinking caps. This is heavy stuff, but well worth the strain on our gray cells.

The apostle Paul leads into this fascinating tale with a series of reminders and gentle rebukes.

v3: Let no one in any way deceive you...

v5: Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

v6: And you know...

Paul says, *I've told you this before. You already know it, but let's go over it again.* Let's read the larger context of our passage.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:5-10.

v6

For almost two thousand years scholars have been debating what Paul refers to with, in v6, "**what** restrains him now," and, in v7, "**he** who now restrains will do so until **he** is taken out of the way" (emphasis added).

Especially confusing for some has been that the verb translated "what restrains" (**to** *katechon*) is neuter (i.e., presumably a "thing" or a force), while the verb in v7 translated "he who...restrains" (**heos** *katechon*) is masculine. These, along with the general tone of vague mysticism in these verses, can indeed leave one scratching one's head to discern what Paul is actually saying.

Over the centuries the list of possible identifications has included Michael, Elijah, the apostles, the saints in Jerusalem, the Mosaic law, Paul, Seneca, and many others. Rising to the top, however, of all the possible interpretations has traditionally been the identification of the neuter "**what** restrains" with the Roman Empire, and the masculine "**he** who...restrains" with the Emperor himself.

But after discussing the pros and cons of this interpretation, Robert L. Thomas points out the obvious: "Elimination of this solution is sealed when we remember that the Roman Empire has long since ceased to exist, and the appearance of Christ or the lawless one has yet to take place."

Let's back up a minute; let's not forget who we are dealing with here. The "man of lawlessness"—the Antichrist—will be more than just a wicked man. Look at v9.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:9.

Without at all suggesting equivalency, what Christ is to God the Father, Antichrist is to Satan. As Christ exhibited certain supernatural powers, given Him by His Father, so the Antichrist will exhibit certain supernatural powers, given him by *his* father. Like Judas, he will begin as an ordinary man, but Satan will "enter into" him ([Luke 22:3](#)) at some point, sharing with him some of his supernatural powers. Jesus foretold this.

Read Matthew 24:23-25.

Supernatural power requires a supernatural opponent. Verse 6 speaks of a force capable of restraining supernatural evil—and doing so for a very long time, for, as John points out, the "*spirit* of the Antichrist" was in the world even in the first century. The rather obvious identification of the restrainer is God, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Read v6.

And you know what restrains him now

But we still have the quandary of the neuter verb in v6. (Here's where this gets really good.)

A Technical Explanation

Most of us know that the proper designation for the Spirit of God is the masculine "He" or "Him." But, when there is a good reason, He can also be referred to in the neuter gender—especially when coupled with the noun *pneuma*

(spirit, breath, wind). So when speaking of the Spirit's *personality*, one would use the masculine, but when one wants to be in agreement with a neuter noun, one would use a neuter verb. For example, as Lange puts it, "The neuter in [v6] denotes the power, the principle; the masculine in [v7], a personality at the head of that power."

A Corporate Explanation

Which brings us to a second way of looking at this (as a few commentators suggest).

Question: What is removed from the earth before the man of lawlessness is revealed? **Answer:** The church.

As bad as this world's culture is, imagine how much worse it would be without the influence of the church. Because of the context, I speak of "the church" less as a powerful, authoritative body, as do Catholics, but more as a supernatural force, the key to which is the indwelling Holy Spirit.

It can be said that the church—the world-wide, spiritually interlinked community of believers in Christ Jesus—exerts, as a collective, a binding force upon the evil that dwells in and on a fallen earth—a world that is in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). If the "spirit of the Antichrist" pervades, it is met by the Spirit of Christ, working through His body, the church. Is there any wonder that unimaginable havoc and evil will ensue when every Christian is removed from the earth!

Summary

So to summarize, the "what" in v6 can easily refer to the Holy Spirit, but another way of interpreting the difference between "what" and "He" is that the latter refers to the person and personality of the Holy Spirit, while the former refers to the work He accomplishes on earth through individual believers, as well as the *community* of believers—both of which exert a binding (or at least restricting) force against evil.

Does this not illumine in a fresh way what the apostle John writes in his first letter.

Read 1 John 4:2-4.

...so that in his time he will be revealed.

The "he" and "his" in the second part of v6 is not the same "he" of v7. And once again we have a parallel, *in reverse*, to Christ.

Read Galatians 4:3-5.

To be precise, the word translated "time" in Galatians (*chronos*) is different from the word in our text (*kairos*), but the idea is the same. Paul is saying in Galatians that we were previously enslaved to the base and worthless principles of a fallen world. But then, just when everything was in place and ready, God sent His Son Jesus to redeem us from our natural birthright, so that we could be adopted by Father God.

In Thessalonians he is saying the same thing, except that the situation and characters are in the reverse. For almost two thousand years, so far, the Holy Spirit has been holding down the power of evil in this world. Yes, this world *is* evil, and ruled by the evil one, Satan, but it would be far worse were not the Spirit and the body of Christ here to hold fast against the tsunami of dark forces waiting to overwhelm everything in its path.

But there will come a moment in time—a season, a proper time in the life of the Antichrist—when Father God will declare, "Now!" Suddenly, without warning, the righteous force of the church will disappear from earth, and with it the exerting influence of the Holy Spirit ([more on this in our next session](#)). In their place will flood in evil of all sorts, and the "man of lawlessness" will gradually show himself to be the savior for which the world has been waiting. He will be winsome, agreeable, helpful, because, like his father, he will be a liar of the first order.

Then, after a few years, when he takes his seat in the temple of Jerusalem, he will be revealed for what and who he truly is: the Antichrist, evil incarnate, and the period that follows—the Great Tribulation—will make the previous three-and-a-half years look like a walk in the park.

SESSION 43: THE SPIRIT AT WORK, PART TWO

2 Thessalonians 2:6-7

PREFACE

We established in our last session on v6 that the “what” that restrains is the Holy Spirit, as well as that same Spirit working through Christians individually and corporately as the church. We established that the one *being* restrained is the “man of lawlessness,” the son of perdition, the Antichrist.

Verses 6 and 7 are the closing strains of the overture before the curtain rises on the final days, the intricately woven four-act play of Christ’s righteous kingdom being established. Between verses 7 and 8 the curtain rises with His return to gather His brothers and sisters and take them home with Him before, quite literally, all hell breaks loose on earth.

Let’s review our time frame for the opening verses of this chapter. It can be a little confusing because Paul moves effortlessly back and forth in (prophetic) time.

v2: that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Here Paul refers not to the Rapture, but to Christ’s return in power and judgment at the end of the Tribulation.

v3: Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,

The “it” in v3 refers to “the day of the Lord” mentioned in v2, and the rest of the verse describes the first three-and-a-half years of the Tribulation—up to the moment when the Antichrist is revealed for what he truly is.

v4: who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

V4 describes the climactic moment of the Tribulation, when the Antichrist takes over the Jerusalem temple, declares himself God, and the fullness of his evil is displayed for all to see. This marks the beginning of the *Great* Tribulation—the last three-and-a-half years of the seven-year Tribulation.

v6: And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed.

v7: For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.

In v6 and the beginning of v7 Paul backs up to describe the present situation—present for him, as well as for us. The Holy Spirit, the church and, some believe, civic law, restrain both the “*spirit* of the Antichrist,” as well as, perhaps, “*the* Antichrist.” He awaits the time of God’s choosing to begin his rise to power and dominance.

In the second part of v7 Paul continues forward in (prophetic) time to the moment when the restraining force is removed during the Rapture.

v8: Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;

Finally, in v8 Paul compresses the seven-year Tribulation, through the return of Christ in judgment, into one verse.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7.

A Lampel paraphrase (replacing the pronouns):

And you know that the Holy Spirit restrains the man of lawlessness now, so that in the lawless man’s time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only the Holy Spirit, who now restrains, will do so until that same Spirit is taken out of the way.

For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work

In v3 Paul refers to the Antichrist as the “man of lawlessness,” and here he speaks of the “mystery of lawlessness.”

Our focus of late has been on Satan and his man on earth, the Antichrist. But when we trace this “mystery of iniquity,” as the KJV puts it, back to its origin on earth, we discover as the devil’s willing servant not the Antichrist, but man. Indeed, if we trace it *all the way* back, we discover the Creator Himself.

Read Genesis 3:1-6.

Note in v1: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made.” Satan was and is a created being—an angel created by God. The serpent in which he manifested himself was created by God. Yet he, with the willing assistance of the first woman and man introduced lawlessness, iniquity, not just on earth, but into the seed of all future generations. Here is mystery indeed.

Note: Please do not misunderstand what I am saying: By this I am not suggesting that God is the root of all evil; James tells us that God does not tempt us toward evil. I am simply pointing out that all of the actors responsible for sin dwelling in this world were beings created by God, which is empirically true from God’s word. That’s all.

W. G. Humphrey: The “mystery of iniquity” is the power unseen, unknown except by its effects, which is ever working in the world for evil—working against the law and will of God, corrupting what has been well done and well begun by man, causing misery in the natural world in all that man has to do with, through the mischief which it works in the moral and spiritual world, in the heart and soul of men.

What makes this a “mystery”? It seems to most of us that lawlessness—just another term for sin, for disobedience to God—is rampant, out there for all to see. But like its namesake, what we see is just the tip of the iceberg; there is far more lying beneath the surface.

Vincent: A mystery does not lie in the obscurity of a thing, but in its secrecy. It is not in the thing, but envelops it. Applied to a truth, it signifies a truth once hidden but now revealed or to be revealed; a truth which without special revelation would be unknown. It is almost universally found in connection with words signifying publication or revelation. (See on Matthew 13:11) The “mystery of lawlessness” is the mass of lawlessness yet hidden, but which is to reveal itself in the person and power of Antichrist. The position of the word is emphatic, emphasizing the concealed character of the evil power.

Bishop Jewell: This mystery, saith St. Paul, doth already work. It shall increase, and go forward, and grow to a perfection. A thorn, when it is young, is soft and gentle; ye may thrust at it with your finger, it will not hurt you: but after it waxeth and groweth hard and stubborn, it will pierce the flesh, and draw blood. A bear, when he is young, is harmless and innocent; ye may dandle it, and dally with it, as with a whelp; it hath no chambers to gripe, no teeth to bite, nor paws to tear: but after, it will grow, and become fierce and cruel like the sire. A serpent, when it is young, is little and pretty; it hath no sting, nor poison; you may take it in your hand, and lay it in your lap, it will not hurt you: after, it will increase in venom, and grow in mischief, and be like itself; then it will shake the sting, and cast poison, and prove dangerous. Such a thorn, such a bear, such a serpent is Antichrist. At the first he shall seem soft, and gentle, and innocent. After, he shall grow fierce, and arm himself with sting and poison. But a thorn, though it be soft, is a thorn: a bear, though he be little, is a bear: a serpent, though he be pretty, is a serpent. Even so Antichrist, though he seem gentle, mild, and simple, yet is he Antichrist. He groweth by degrees, he will be like his sire; his paws will be dreadful, his mouth will be deadly.

only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.

Primarily because of the “what” in v6, we have included the body of Christ, the church, along with the Holy Spirit, in the identification of the restrainer. But in v7 we have only the masculine “he” being used, so the emphasis here is on the Spirit alone.

Read v7.

until he is taken out of the way = heos ek mesou genetai

Most of the phrase “until he is taken out of the way” is self-explanatory, but the word translated “the way” is worth

a longer look. The Greek word *mesou* is from the adjective *mesos*, which means “in the middle, in the midst, in between.” In classical Greek it had become a legal term with the meaning of the neutral place between two parties in conflict. In the context of this future point in time—the Rapture, and the start of the Tribulation—it refers to one of the roles the Holy Spirit has been performing since the church age was inaugurated in Acts 2: restricting the power of evil on earth—in a sense, standing between lawlessness and righteousness, but not in this instance as a neutral party.

When He “is taken out of the way” the Spirit is relieved of that duty, thus granting lawlessness free rein on earth, with the Antichrist as instigator and cheerleader.

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT DURING THE TRIBULATION

So now we finally come to the question raised more than a month ago: Is there a role on earth for the Holy Spirit during the Tribulation? The answer is, yes indeed—except for the standard caveat regarding the End Times that there are varying opinions and positions on this.

Right now we are in the “Church Age,” and God’s Holy Spirit is key to this epoch. It was His coming—permanently, instead of transitory—to the apostles in Acts 2 that instituted the Church Age, and it will be His being “taken out of the way” that will officially close the Church Age. I purposely use the language of Paul in 2 Thessalonians—“taken out of the way”—rather than saying that He “leaves.” His role will change—more accurately, will revert, somewhat, to His earlier pre-church role—but it will not cease.

[for portions of what follows I am indebted to Thomas Ice, executive director of the Pre-Trib Research Center, at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, and his paper entitled, “The Holy Spirit and the Tribulation.”]

In the Old Testament

The Holy Spirit has been at work in this world from the moment He had a hand in its creation. As far as His work in individuals—that role most familiar to us in the church age—with only a few exceptions the Spirit’s presence was transitory: it entered a person for a specific reason, and it would or could leave after that. When King David cried out in Psalm 51—

**Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. (Psalm 51:11)**

—there was a very real possibility that the Spirit might depart from him because of his sin. Let’s illustrate this from God’s word, using King Saul as an example. In 1 Samuel 10 the prophet begins the transformation of Saul by anointing him.

Read 1 Samuel 10:1. (Hebrew *mashach* = messiah)

In the verses that follow, Samuel prophesies what will happen to the young man over a period of days—including in v6,

Read 1 Samuel 10:6.

As soon as Saul turned to go, God began his transformation.

Read 1 Samuel 10:9-11.

So Saul was anointed, his heart was changed by God, and the Spirit of God entered him—confirmed by his immediate prophetic utterances. But then Saul began to believe his own press clippings. In Chapter Fifteen Saul is told to wipe out every living thing of the Amalekites—including all the animals. When Samuel confronts the king after the battle, Saul proudly reports, “I have carried out the command of the Lord.” And with one of the funniest retorts in Scripture, Samuel cups a hand to his ear, and says, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?”

And in the next chapter, just moments after David is anointed and the Spirit of God enters him, the Spirit is removed from King Saul—but not just that; God replaced in Saul “the Spirit of the Lord” with “an evil spirit from the Lord.” and once again, the people could immediately see the transformation.

Read 1 Samuel 16:13-15.

The story of King Saul is a pretty good picture of how the Holy Spirit worked in and through people in the days before the church age. He came, He went; He entered to instill specific, required talents (as He did for the creation of the first tabernacle); He instilled faith in and obedience to Yahweh; in humans He was an active force, but He was not, as a rule, a permanent dweller.

During the Church Age

Turn to 1 Corinthians 12.

Since Pentecost, God has been gathering out from the Gentiles a people for His name ([Acts 15:14](#)), and combining that group with the elect remnant of Israel ([Romans 11:1-5](#)) to build the Church. The Holy Spirit plays a key role in this, for it is He who convicts the unbeliever to repent and believe, and it is He who indwells the believer as a surety of salvation, as Comforter, Encourager, as a seal of the promise, and, not least, as the One who continues to convict of sin. By most of us this is referred to as the “baptism of the Holy Spirit.”

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.

The Rapture is not just Jesus sparing His church from the Tribulation; it is the formal, epochal closing of the church doors. As an institution the church closes up shop at the Rapture and the Spirit being “taken out of the way.” As Dr. John Walvoord puts it, “While the Spirit continues a ministry in the world in the tribulation, there is no longer a corporate body of believers knit into one living organism.” So the Spirit’s role in that body is drawn to a close.

During the Tribulation

Working hand-in-hand with the pretribulation position is the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 that the Holy Spirit has been the restrainer, and that when the church is removed at the Rapture, the ministry of the Spirit *through* the church is removed as well. But this does not mean that the Spirit does not remain present and active on earth. Here is how Dr. Thomas Ice explains it:

Thomas Ice: We do believe the Holy Spirit will not be carrying out His present unique ministry related to the Church since the completed body of Christ will be in heaven. Further, we are saying that the Holy Spirit will be present in His transdispensational ministry of bringing the elect of the tribulation to faith in Christ, even though they will not be part of the body of Christ—the Church. The Holy Spirit will also aid Tribulation believers as they live holy lives unto the Lord. The Holy Spirit will also function to seal and protect the 144,000 Jewish witnesses for their great evangelistic ministry as noted in Revelation 7 and 14 and the two witnesses of Revelation 11.

One could say that this is a *variation* on the Spirit’s OT ministry. It may not be accurate to say that He simply reverts back to what He was doing during the OT; it will be different in a number of respects. Here is how Dr. Ice concludes his paper:

Thomas Ice: The Rapture could very well be the greatest evangelistic tool in human history. When millions of people disappear from the face of the earth in a split second of time, all kinds of theories and explanations will surface. But many will remember the warnings of friends and loved ones about the truth of the Rapture. In a moment of time, they will realize what has happened. They have been left behind. God will use this mind-numbing realization to bring them to faith in His Son. The Holy Spirit will be active, as He always has throughout history, to bring the elect to salvation in Christ.

Even though pretribulationists believe that many unique aspects of the current work of the Holy Spirit will cease at the rapture, it is not correct to say that we believe the Holy Spirit will not be present during the tribulation. Just as the Holy Spirit will engage in some ministries during the tribulation, relating to the 144,000 witnesses and the two witnesses, that are not occurring during the current church age, so there will cease certain ministries unique to the church which will enable the man of sin to come onto the stage of history.

SESSION 44: THE END OF LAWLESSNESS, PART ONE

2 Thessalonians 2:8

PREFACE

Sometimes the apostle Paul packs so much into a passage that as you read it and consider all that he is saying, your head swims from all the information and powerful imagery. Just such a passage is before us now, and although it will be necessary to break it up into multiple sessions, it is important that we read and consider the fullness of vv8-12 at the outset.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12.

While it is true that we have a longsuffering, patient and gracious God, He does have His breaking point—or shall we say that for God there is a point at which, for either future salvation or ultimate judgment, He in essence turns His back on individuals or nations to let them wallow in their sin and rebellion.

Scripture includes a number of such instances. At a glance they can seem harsh, even out of character for our God. But they are actually *true* to His character; He is a holy God who will put up with sin only so long, and He will insist that the offender get off the fence. Just this last week I read an example of this in a passage in [Judges 10](#).

Already—even before we get to Kings and Chronicles—Israel’s vacillation has become a monotonous cycle. After the judge Jair (yaw-ear’) died, v6 tells us that, once again, “Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh...they forsook Yahweh and did not serve Him.”

The Lord’s response? Verse 7.

The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the sons of Ammon.

After eighteen years of this, Israel does what it always does—it cries “uncle” in v10.

Then the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, “We have sinned against You, for indeed, we have forsaken our God and served the Baals.”

But Yahweh, this time, does not immediately forgive.

Read Judges 10:11-14.

He is, indeed, a gracious, merciful God, and when Israel came back, not just confessing with words, but demonstrating submission, Yahweh relented.

Read Judges 10:15-16.

In Psalm 81 God through Asaph declares,

**“But My people did not listen to My voice,
And Israel did not obey Me.
So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart,
To walk in their own devices.” (Psalm 81:11-12)**

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was of the opinion that the first chapter of Romans contained descriptions of acts so vile that he considered it unsuitable for public reading.

This first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans is a dreadful portion of the Word of God. I should hardly like to read it all through aloud; it is not intended to be so used. Read it at home, and be startled at the awful vices of the Gentile world.

Here at the beginning of his profound letter to the Romans, Paul employs words and imagery similar to those in our Thessalonian text.

Read Romans 1:18.

Man knows the truth about God, so has no excuses. It is not that he doesn't know the truth, but that he suppresses it.

Sidebar: Christians should not be smug when they read about this behavior in those who follow after other gods, "serving the creature rather than the Creator" (v25), for we, too, can suppress the truth when it is convenient. Personally, I do not believe in *accidental* sin, where only after the fact are we surprised by the fact that we did something wrong—especially in those who have been believers for many years. We know the truth, but sometimes we just suppress it in our mind, and go ahead and sin anyway. We may feel miserable about it, and we do confess it after the fact, but we go into it with both eyes wide open.

Three times in this chapter Paul uses that dreadful phrase, "God gave them over." That phrase, every time we read it, should send a shudder down our spine.

v24: Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

vv26-27: For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

v28: And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,

The Greek word translated "gave...over" is

paradidomi = from <G3844> (para) and <G1325> (didomi); **to surrender**, i.e. yield up, intrust, transmit :- betray, bring forth, cast, commit, deliver (up), give (over, up), hazard, put in prison, recommend; **to hand over, to give or deliver over.**

David Guzik: We err when we think that it is God's mercy or kindness that allows man to continue in sin. It is actually His wrath that allows us to go on destroying ourselves with sin.

Now let's get back to our text, where the passage as a whole speaks of a similar situation, where once again, God will give people over to the sin in their hearts, their rejection of a holy God. The passage requires a road map, however; it can be confusing. because Paul, again, moves back and forth in time—or covers the same ground twice, rather than moving on. As a rule, ancient writers did not have the same perspective on history (the past) or prophecy (the future) as we. They thought nothing of moving effortlessly back and forth, mixing together the past, the present, the future. We, however, appreciate a more linear, literal timeline.

TIMELINE

Verse 7 ends with the restrainer—the Holy Spirit—being just taken out of the way, placing it in the narrative at the Rapture, when the church is removed from earth and the Spirit's job description is changed, so that evil is given free reign. Thus the Tribulation begins.

As **v8** begins, chronologically we are after the Rapture, when the Antichrist is beginning his move toward world-wide supremacy. But then Paul immediately jumps forward seven years, to the *end* of the Great Tribulation, when Christ will return in power and majesty to slay the lawless one.

Verses 9 and 10 are parenthetical in nature, going back to describe the Antichrist, the source of his power, and the fate of those who follow him and his lies. So the time frame is during the Tribulation.

The same time frame remains in **vv11-12**, where we have a description of God's role in the situation discussed in vv9-10.

If we were to rearrange these verses chronologically into a more linear narrative, vv9-12 would be inserted into the middle of v8, just after "Then that lawless one will be revealed."

v8

Then that lawless one will be revealed...

Verse 8 opens just after the Rapture, when the Antichrist is beginning his move toward world-wide supremacy—or it could refer to the first half of the Tribulation. In this early period of the Tribulation he will be seen as a benign, benevolent messiah. But from at least the mid-point on his evil nature and purpose will be evident. Let's see how the prophet Daniel handles this same period. [Keep your place here, because we are going to be go back and forth for a few minutes, and turn to Daniel 7.](#) In several passages Daniel describes the personality and activity of whom Paul names "that lawless one."

Read Daniel 7:25.

Read Daniel 8:24-25.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:4.

Read Daniel 11:36.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:8b.

Read Daniel 7:26-27.

whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;

As I mentioned before, the second half of v8 jumps forward to the end of the Tribulation, to the return of Christ in majesty and judgment. I love this moment; every time I read it here or elsewhere in Scripture I can't help but think about how so many in our current culture think Jesus should be just some wan, insipid, hippy flower child, just loving everyone and being nice and gentle and sweet, picking daisies all day. Jesus did indeed display some of those traits when He was on earth—sometimes. At other times He pulled no punches, especially when addressing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. Even as a guest in one's home, Jesus didn't hesitate to call a spade a spade. But even that forthright quality pales in comparison to what Christ will be when He returns to end the Tribulation—and the rule of the Antichrist. Christ will return with such power, such supernatural glory, that I have to believe witnesses—especially those who have been rejecting Him—will lose control of every bodily function. But the Antichrist will lose more than that.

Another thing I love about this scene of His return is *how* Christ will "slay" the man of lawlessness. Does He lead an army of His followers in street-to-street fighting as they battle their way toward the temple? Does He send out ten thousand angels to go find and capture the guy? Nope. He just shows up and breathes on him. The text gives two weapons with which Christ will dispatch the enemy:

- the breath of His mouth, and
- the appearance of His coming.

whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth

As Robert L. Thomas points out, "the breath (*pneuma*) of His mouth may be a figurative reference to a word spoken by Christ, but a literal sense is quite satisfactory." We know that for the Godhead, the spoken word is powerful—and creative. By their word alone they spoke the universe into existence; by His word alone Jesus calmed the raging sea. But let's look at just two examples of the power of His breath.

Read 2 Samuel 22:14-16.

Read Isaiah 30:27-28.

slay^{nasb}, **consume**^{kjvs}, **overthrow**^{niv}, **kill**^{esv} = *anelei* = from <G303> (ana) and (the active of) <G138> (haireomai); **to take up, i.e. adopt**; by implication **to take away (violently), i.e. abolish, murder :- put to death, kill, slay, take away, take up.**

This is one of those words that can have a positive or negative connotation. In ancient Rome, when a child was unwanted, the father could “expose” the child—i.e., place it out on the street, where it would either die, or could be “taken up” (anaireo)—i.e., adopted. Used in the Septuagint for the pharaoh’s daughter taking up the baby Moses from the Nile. But the more common use of the word by far is for killing, executing, slaying someone. The word was used for Herod killing all the male children in Bethlehem. (Here in our text the NIV “overthrow” is too weak; Herod did not “overthrow” the babies.)

Everyone seems to agree that Paul borrowed this imagery from Isaiah.

Read Isaiah 11:4.

and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;

bring to an end^{nasb}, **destroy**^{kjvs, niv}, **bring to nothing**^{esv} = *katargesei* = from <G2596> (kata) and <G691> (argeo); **to be (render) entirely idle (useless)**, literal or figurative :- **abolish, cease**, cumber, deliver, **destroy, do away**, become (make) of no (none, without) effect, fail, loose, **bring (come) to nought**, put away (down), vanish away, make void; **to render inoperative.**

Katargesei is the same word used by Paul to describe the effect of the revelation of the gospel on “death” in 2 Timothy 1:10—to render absolutely powerless.

One could say that here in Thessalonians Paul is just employing two different ways to say the same thing: kill. Or he could be saying that by being slayed, the work of the Antichrist suddenly comes to naught. Or he could be saying (as in *Stargate SG-1*) that first the breath kills, then the appearance of His coming vaporizes the remains. Whether it is repetition, nuance or incremental, the result is the same: the man of lawlessness is no more.

epiphaneiai tes parousias autou

Paul uses two words to describe His coming:

- the latter (“coming”) is the familiar **parousia** (presence, coming);
- the second is **epiphaneia i** (manifestation); we get the word epiphany from it. **To the ancients this word was used to describe the visit of a god.**

And here once again we have an example of traditional versions, such as the KJVs, translating this “brightness,” or the NIV translating it “splendor.” Yet most commentators—even older ones—shy away from this interpretation, saying that this speaks less of Christ’s glory (which is implied by “brightness” or “splendor”) than His visible, tangible presence. That is, it is not his glory or glow that destroys, but simply who He is.

The bottom line is this: Christ Jesus need only show up to bring the Tribulation to a screeching halt, and destroy the one who has been selling himself as God. No guns, no fireworks, no armies. His presence and breath alone are sufficient to reclaim this world for Himself.

SESSION 45: THE END OF LAWLESSNESS, PART TWO

2 Thessalonians 2:9-10

PREFACE

Not only is deceit evil, but evil is deceitful. What if it were not; what if, for example, someone running for the U.S. presidency actually told the truth about his or her intentions for the country?

- I will institute a sweeping restructuring of what you have now; your costs will go up as your choices are reduced—or even disappear.
- This will be part of my plan to convert this democratic republic into a socialist state.
- And, by the way, I hate coal miners and oil companies, I hate gun owners, and I hate Christians.

For evil to win in a reasonably civilized society, it must lie, it must deceive. What if the serpent had told the truth in the Garden of Eden? Would Adam and Eve have taken the fruit if he had?

- Yes, you will indeed know both good and evil—but you will become and want to *do* evil.
- By disobeying God you will corrupt not just yourselves, but billions upon billions of people that come after you; from now on every person born on this earth will be born in sin, and alienated from God.
- And oh, by the way, even the earth itself will be corrupted by your disobedience.

To be fair, people who are not evil—evil in a societal, worldly sense—can also deceive. But the righteous don't *have* to lie to convince, whereas evil is, by its nature, deceitful. Our text in 2 Thessalonians speaks of this deceit.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12.

Before we examine v9, I want to look at something in v10. You may be wondering where I get this business of evil being inherently deceitful. Our text holds a clue to this, but some of the translations are not helpful. For example, the NIV says,

and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing.

The way that is expressed, it could easily mean that there are “sorts of evil” that do *not* deceive. But what the Greek literally says is, “every deceit of unrighteousness” —which is how the NASB puts it:

and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish,

The NKJV (“with all unrighteous deception”) and the ESV (“with all wicked deception”) leave open the possibility that there is deception that is *not* evil. What Paul is saying is that deception is the first and paramount tool of Satan and his servant, because not only is it necessary to accomplish their goal, but it flows out of the *inherent nature* of evil.

As usual, Jesus said it best.

Read John 8:43-45.**v9**

I have said before: Without suggesting equivalency, what Christ is to God the Father, Antichrist is to Satan; it is a dark, perverse, mirror image of the original. And, as Paul puts it in v9, just as Christ Jesus will have a *parousia*, so too will the man of lawlessness have a *parousia*. That is the Greek word translated “coming” in v9. And this time instead of his coming in holiness and righteous power from God the Father, the Antichrist will come in accordance with the *energeia* (en-erg'-aye-ah)—the operative power—of *his* father, Satan.

in accord with the activity of Satan

Let's dwell for just a moment on what is meant by “in **accord** with the activity [or work] of Satan.” The word *kata* is one of those versatile prepositions that is translated all sorts of ways throughout Scripture. Here are just a few that give us an idea of what Paul might mean in this context:

after the manner of Satan (KJV)
in agreement with the activity of Satan
conforming to the activity of Satan
with reference to the work of Satan

from the standpoint of Satan
within the work of Satan
with the effect of the work of Satan
with the motives of Satan

with all power and signs and false wonders

Paul also emphasizes Satan's impersonation of Christ by the Antichrist by employing the same words used to describe the work of God through Christ Jesus and His disciples to attest to their authenticity.

Read Hebrews 2:2-4.

Jesus Himself confirmed that this would take place in the end times:

For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. (Matthew 24:24)

power = *dynamis* = from <G1410> (dunamai); **force** (literal or figurative); **especially miraculous power (usually by implication a miracle itself)** :- ability, abundance, meaning, might (-ily, -y, -y deed), (worker of) miracle (-s), power, strength, violence, might (wonderful) work.

signs = *semeion* (say-may'-on) = neuter of a presumed derivative of the base of <G4591> (semaino); **an indication, especially ceremonial or supernatural** :- miracle, sign, **token**, wonder.

wonders = *teras* = an omen; a wonder or **marvel**.

The venerable W. E. Vine puts these three into perspective for us:

A sign is intended to appeal to the understanding, a wonder appeals to the imagination, a power indicates its source as supernatural.

Note: If you compare the various translations you will find that the modifier "false" floats around a bit. Wherever it belongs, we should not interpret this verse as meaning that these signs and wonders are somehow fake. I don't mean to pick on the NIV, but the word "counterfeit" is not appropriate, nor should it modify all three. Once again, as with "deception of wickedness" in v10, order is important. As Robert L. Thomas writes, "They will not be 'counterfeit' but *genuine supernatural feats to produce false impressions*, deluding people to the point of accepting the lie as truth." (emphasis added) Satan is not God, but he *is* supernatural, with powers beyond the abilities of man, and he will pour these powers into the man of lawlessness for his own dark purpose.

v10

Alongside "all power and signs and false wonders," the man of lawlessness will be coming "with all the deception of wickedness." Verse 10 begins the descent, during the Tribulation, of unbelievers into irretrievable perdition.

Just who are these people? To who does Paul refer here? Are they antagonistic to God to start with (i.e., unregenerate), or do they become that by means of God's deluding influence (v11)?

and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish

NASB, KJVs: those who perish

NIV, ESV: those who are perishing

Personally I favor "perishing," and I wouldn't mind having an audience with the editors of the NASB to ask them why they chose "perish," when, in 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 2 Corinthians they chose "perishing" for the very same word (*apollumenois*). Not that they haven't the right to; I'd just like to understand their reasoning.

Sidebar: For all those publishers of Bibles out there, I would like to propose a new type of publication: a Bible that includes running commentary by the scholarly editors. This way we could know *why* the editors chose to translate passages as they did.

We are all born in a state of perishing; we are all born upon the pathway to condemnation and death. And this passage in the Thessalonian letters refers to the same individuals as those in the Corinthian letters: the unregenerate; those who have rejected Christ.

because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

We can look at this from two directions:

- they did not receive because it was not offered
- they chose not to receive it when it was offered

First, if some are counted among the elect ([Romans 8:30](#); [John 6:44, 65](#)), this means that some are *not*. Part of being chosen by God is to be granted as a gift a love of *the* truth (note the definite article: not love of truth, but love of *the* truth). This is, admittedly, a peripheral interpretation, but I believe it is worthy of note—if for no other reason than to reinforce in our minds God’s manifest control over all this. Our relationship with God, with Christ Jesus, with the Holy Spirit, and with His written word—all is dependent on His grace, and if He does not grant that grace, we do not receive it. Jesus spoke of this to His disciples in the gospel of Matthew.

Read Matthew 13:10-13.

The more direct interpretation of the end of v10 is that these individuals *chose* not to receive, or accept, the truth. The Greek *dechomai* does indeed emphasize a more passive receiving (as opposed to taking, which more often uses the Greek *lambano*), but in both the Septuagint (OT) and NT *dechomai* is used as a technical term for the believing acceptance of God’s divine word (OT) and acceptance of the gospel (NT).

After Jesus’ description of Satan as the father of lies in John 8, He continues on in His discourse about the receiving of truth.

Read John 8:45-47.

Matthew Henry, writing in 1708 about the behavior of people far into the future, but written about in the first century by the apostle Paul in our text, could be describing the society of our own time.

Matthew Henry: The persons are described who are [the Antichrist’s] willing subjects, or most likely to become such. They are such as love not the truth that they may be saved. They heard the truth (it may be), but they did not love it; they could not bear sound doctrine, and therefore easily imbibed false doctrines; they had some notional knowledge of what was true, but they indulged some powerful prejudices, and so became a prey to seducers. Had they loved the truth, they would have persevered in it, and been preserved by it; but no wonder if they easily parted with what they never had any love to. And of these persons it is said that they perish or are lost; they are in a lost condition, and in danger to be lost for ever.

And Matthew Poole puts into perspective this passage with the next, which cues up our next session on vv11-12.

Matthew Poole: They were first deluded, which was their sin; and God sends them strong delusion, and that is their punishment.

SESSION 46: THE END OF LAWLESSNESS, PART THREE

2 Thessalonians 2:11-12

PREFACE

Remember that verses 9-12 are parenthetical in nature; chronologically they should be inserted into the middle of v8, between the lawless one being revealed, and his slaying by the appearance and breath of Christ Jesus.

Verses 9-10, which we looked at last week, focuses on the nature and behavior of the “man of lawlessness,” as well as the rejection of the truth by his followers (or the unregenerate during the Tribulation).

The passage before us today, vv11-12, focuses on God’s response to their rejection of Him and His truth.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12.

v11

The beginning of v11 points back to the end of v10.

For this reason...

What reason?

because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

What will God do for this reason?

God will send upon them a deluding influence

Why will He do this?

so that they will believe what is false,

To what end?

in order that they all may be judged

To a world culture that, if it believes in Him at all, clings tenaciously to the admittedly Biblical concept that “God is love,” this behavior by Him comes as quite a shock. Why in the world would God force upon the unsaved any influence that would finalize and condemn that condition?

This world (including, sadly, many of its churches) is filled with individuals that believe in a one-dimensional God. They do not even permit His personality and nature the subtle gradations they permit themselves. For example, seeing and embracing His love, they remain blind to His other qualities—such as holiness and justice—and how these all work together. And if they *do* believe in His justice, they think it goes only in one direction: grace—i.e., *Surely he knows that, at heart, I am a good person*—when, in actuality, His justice requires Him to pronounce condemnation on them: *You have no goodness in yourself. If you will not acknowledge My Son as Savior and Lord, you are lost. This is utterly just.*

For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence

This is not new for the Lord God. This is not something He trots out special for the End Times.

deluding influence^{nasb}, **strong delusion**^{kjvs,esv}, **powerful delusion**^{niv} = literally, an activity or working of error, an active power of misleading.

Turn please to 1 Kings 22.

King Ahab was right up there as one of the most evil kings of Israel. Near the end of his reign he wanted to once again go to war against Aram to reclaim Ramoth-gilead (*raw-mothe’ gil-awd’*) for Israel. The king of Judah would go with him into battle, but first he required the king of Israel to seek the word of the Lord on the matter.

Read 1 Kings 22:6.

Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, knew the four hundred prophets were just telling King Ahab what he wanted to hear. So he asked if there was any *honest* “prophet of the Lord.”

Read 1 Kings 22:8-9.

So here’s the scene: The two kings are decked out in their best finery, sitting on matching thrones. All around them are these four hundred “prophets” babbling on, saying, “Go up to Ramoth-gilead and prosper, for the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.” The messenger prompts the true prophet, Micaiah, “Listen, there’s a consensus among the prophets that the king should go to battle. Don’t rock the boat; just go along with the rest.”

Standing before the throne, his king puts the question to him, and he first answers, mimicking and mocking the sea of false prophets surrounding him, “Go up and succeed, and the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.” But Ahab knows the prophet is just scamming him.

Read 1 Kings 22:16-18.

And then Micaiah recounts a scene taking place in heaven, and this is what ties into our Thessalonian passage.

Read 1 Kings 22:19-23.

Ahab went to battle and, indeed, he was killed. Now let’s look at a more familiar account in Romans 1 where the Lord God intervenes to “give over” evil individuals to even deeper evil. We were here just recently, so we’ll look at just the bottom line.

Read Romans 1:28.

So what God will do during the Tribulation is nothing new. To be honest we have to ask, *Does God’s action in these situations constitute Him sending evil upon these individuals?* Our text in 2 Thessalonians states, “God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false.” *Is this an instance of God making them sin?* After all, James tells us that God will not do this.

Read James 1:13.

But as we read on, James answers the question for us.

Read James 1:14-15.

John Peter Lange: Does God Himself send an energy of delusion? The Greek Fathers thought this too harsh, and softened the expression by taking the sending for a bare permission; but improperly. Our fathers of the Reformation especially insisted on recognizing the will of God as powerfully active even in judgments of this kind. Already in the Old Testament He sends evil spirits (1Sa_16:13 sqq.; 1Ki_22:22); to wit, for the punishment of sin by sin (comp. Rom_1:24 sqq.). He is the holy God, and therefore is never the first Author of evil; but the evil that already exists He turns to His own holy ends. He does not produce in the heart falsehood and wickedness; but where they are already in the heart, there He puts a lying spirit in the mouth of the false prophets. From the corrupt seed that is in the heart he brings forth this fruit, that it serves His purpose. Thou art to have thy will, and reap what thou hast sown. This judgment is never a faint, impotent permission, but a powerful operation, though to the last with a salutary aim (Rom_11:32); only in cases where the period of grace is trifled away, does it issue in irreclaimable obduracy (Mat_13:14-15). [obduracy = hardening]

As I read in our last session, all of this this that Lange has written, Matthew Poole condensed into one sentence.

Matthew Poole: They were first deluded, which was their sin; and God sends them strong delusion, and that is their punishment.

so that they will believe what is false

How this plays out on the ground is that God will wrap them up in the straitjacket of their own sin. He will send upon them a supernatural force—in the OT it would be called an evil spirit—that will insure that they are fully and fatally taken in by, correctly, *the* lie—the *big* lie that has been with man since the Garden, that God is not who He says He is, and that we need not listen to Him or obey Him.

In a sense, just as the Antichrist is the dark mirror image of Christ Jesus, this “deluding influence” is the dark mirror image of the perseverance of the saints. Those who are truly regenerated *will* persevere to the end—God will see to it. Just so, during the Tribulation, to those who have been doggedly unregenerate, persistent in their rejection of truth, God will insure with this deluding influence that their end will be what they deserve. Under this influence, they will believe and follow after every outrageous claim made by Antichrist; having lost their reason, they will be powerless against him. Here is the justice of a holy God.

v12

To what end? What is God’s end-game?

Read v12.

in order that they all may be judged

In our common versions, only the NASB translates this literally.

judged = *krino* = properly **to distinguish, i.e. decide** (mentally or judicially); by implication to try, condemn, punish :- avenge, conclude, condemn, damn, decree, determine, esteem, judge, go to (sue at the) law, ordain, call in question, sentence to, think.

Though the Greek is neutral, not mentioning a verdict, the other versions project the obvious: **condemned**^{niv,esv,nkjv}, **damned**^{kjv}. God’s verdict is not in question. The context makes it clear. And who will be judged?

[those] who did not believe the truth,

Let’s return for just a moment to this societal position that God is love, God is gracious, and certainly would not do such a hateful thing as condemn people to an eternity of torment in hell. OK, let’s look at God’s definition of love.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-6.

True love, *agape* love, does not take pleasure in unrighteousness, evil, but instead rejoices in the truth—not just truth, but *the* truth. So a God who is love *must* condemn evil, as He delights in the truth. In contrast, the individuals described here did *not* believe the truth.

believe = *pisteuo* = from <G4102> (*pistis*); **to have faith** (in, upon, or with respect to, a person or thing), i.e. credit; by implication **to entrust** (especially one’s spiritual well-being to Christ) :- believe (-r), commit (to trust), **put in trust with**.

They refused to place their faith in the truth about God, and His Son, the *true* Christ. Instead, they

took pleasure in wickedness.

We must not make the mistake of accepting a casual meaning of this word translated “took pleasure.”

took pleasure = *eudokeo* = from <G2095> (*eu*) and <G1380> (*dokeo*); **to think well of, i.e. approve** (an act); specially to approbate (a person or thing) :- think good, (be well) please (-d), be the good (have, take) pleasure, be willing.

This is not a picture of someone dabbling in that which is evil, taking pleasure in it when they occasionally feel like it. No, this is a description of someone who *agrees with*, who *approves* of wickedness. Let’s return to Romans 1 to see how Paul closes a long list of those with a depraved mind.

Read Romans 1:32. (Not KJV)

“Give hearty approval” in the NASB is a form of the same word in our Thessalonian passage, *syneudokeo*. Even though they “know the ordinance of God,” even though they know they will be judged as deserving death, they not only join in this behavior, they gladly, *eagerly* join the club. God may have the final verdict on them, but they have already condemned themselves.

As we bid a relieved adieu to this dark passage of Scripture and its leading character, let us close with this convicting reminder from the late George Sexton.

George Sexton: Men pursue an evil course until they come to believe it to be right. Look at that fine boy who is just leaving his home for the workshop or the college. He has been brought up in a pure family, surrounded by all that is good and pious. But the first day in his new surroundings words fall on his ears which horrify him; these, or similar, he will hear again and again, until they cease to affect him. Then, and at a later stage, he will himself indulge in coarseness and profanity with the rest, and perhaps become the very blackest of all that black company. The inworking of sin and error will destroy conscience, and that most fearful of all states be reached in which no remorse be experienced, but rather pride in sin. Man very largely moulds his own character, and with it his beliefs; and very often, alas if he comes to “believe a lie,” and his doing so is entirely his own fault.

The work of sin in our lives cannot be blamed on a holy and just God. It percolates up from our own nature and proclivities.

But let’s not end with this; let’s end on a more positive, affirming note, which we find in the text for our next session.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15.

SESSION 47: THROWING OPEN THE WINDOWS

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

PREFACE

There are very special moments of grace during the typical Midwest summer. Very often we will have several days, perhaps even a week, of oppressive and unrelenting heat and humidity. If one does not have air-conditioning, one spends that time either in the basement of his house, or languishing away, miserable and sweating before a fan. If one does have air-conditioning, one spends that time grateful for the comfort, but after a while longing to break free of the hermetically sealed recycled air.

Then comes one fresh morning, typically after a thunderstorm, when a front has passed through, the breeze has switched to the north, and we throw wide our windows and drink in the cool, invigorating, restorative, fresh air. There is nothing like it.

We are at just such a moment in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. For the last twelve verses of Chapter Two we have been slogging through the fetid miasma of the Tribulation, and the cloying, oppressive presence of its "man of lawlessness"—the Antichrist. But the front has passed through, and this morning we throw wide the windows of God's word to drink in the fresh air.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14.

v13

But we should always give thanks to God for you

What reassurance, what affirming joy is found in v13! Paul repeats his phrase from the greeting of this letter in 1:3, but this time the "you" seems to be emphasized and stands in stark contrast to the "them"s and "they"s in the previous passage.

v10: and with all the deception of wickedness for **those** who perish, because **they** did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

v11: For this reason God will send upon **them** a deluding influence so that **they** will believe what is false,

v12: in order that **they** all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

One has a sense that by v13 Paul cannot wait to contrast the Thessalonians with those just described during the Tribulation, to remind these new believers that they are not and will not be part of that company of reprobates. And he does so throughout the verse.

As in 1:3, "should," "ought" = Paul feels a personal *responsibility* to offer thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians.

brethren beloved by the Lord

In both passages he refers to them as brothers, but here he adds "beloved by the Lord." And again, we wonder if he isn't going out of his way to reassure them that, in contrast to those to whom God sent a "deluding influence" as judgment, they, the church at Thessalonica, are actually *loved* by Him.

because God has chosen you from the beginning

Let's first address the issue with the Greek text beneath the phrase translated "from the beginning." It is a challenging text to translate because it is atypical for Paul. But most scholars conclude that "from the beginning" is preferred, and almost all our common versions reflect this. The exception in this case is the ESV with "as the firstfruits." (*firstfruits out of what group?*)

The reference clearly hearkens back to how Paul greeted them in his first letter.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-4.

Those who are saved can take no credit, cannot feel any sense of pride because of this. We can only shake our heads in wonderment, for it is all of God and, from a human perspective, utterly inexplicable.

for salvation

Read Ephesians 1:3-6.

Well before His creation had all settled into place, God saved believers—and our previous text expands on all this for which we should be grateful. His choosing of us does indeed save us from an eternity in hell, but the second chapter of this letter reminds us that He also saved us from the torments of the Tribulation. Put succinctly, God saved us from unbelief—which Paul references at the end of this verse.

through sanctification by the Spirit

Question: How many ways can you think of that the Holy Spirit is active in our sanctification?

- He convicts us of our sin, and need for Christ (John 16:8)
- He is operative in our regeneration (Titus 3:5)
- He confirms and assures us of our salvation (Romans 8:16)
- He is the guarantor of the (future) promises of our salvation (Ephesians 1:13-14)
- He initially sanctifies, then conducts our *progressive* sanctification (1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 Peter 1:2)
- He dispenses our gifts—which are essential to one of the reasons we are saved in the first place (1 Corinthians 12:7ff)

and faith in the truth.

Here is the direct counterpoint to vv11-12:

v11-12: For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

v13: ...God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation...and faith in the truth.

Here is the evidence that we are not saved by *our* faith—that is, our human-sourced faith is not the determinative element for our salvation or sanctification, because our faith in the truth is from God. He instilled in us saving faith; it is from Him, not self-generated.

Examine every step of an unregenerate sinner becoming a regenerate saint, and you will discover that at every point along the way it is all of God, not of us.

But here also is one more token, one more guarantor of our life in Him. When we open God's word and it makes sense; when the Holy Spirit clarifies and translates His eternal truths for our understanding, and thus we have faith in His word—that faith comes from Him, and we can know that we belong to Him. We can know that, from the beginning, God has chosen us for Himself.

v14

Read v14.

Again Paul emphasizes that none of this is of ourselves, but all of God. It also gives us a good answer to the recurring question, If all this is preordained by God, where is the need for evangelism, for missionaries, for the preaching of the gospel? Paul says "He called you *through* our gospel."

Robert L. Thomas: The good news of divine truth conveyed through Paul's preaching was the means through which God called these Thessalonian converts at a particular point in time. What God purposed in eternity was carried out in history that the future might bring them a share "in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The "this" in "It was for this" refers back to the end of v13:

salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

One would think free salvation would suffice, that it would be enough that God would save us from an eternity in hell. But no, in *His* idea of salvation it is not enough. Those chosen by Him will indeed escape hell, but they will also be given a share in Christ's glory.

Read 1 John 3:1-2.

when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.

Let's dwell on this for a moment.

Sidebar: The "for" in the KJVs and NIV does not really capture the idea of the Greek *hoti*, which is more causative, making the NASB and ESV "because" more appropriate.

I believe there are at least two ways we can interpret this:

- **Validation:** We find ourselves in heaven. We know we have gone through some sort of change, but we're not sure what it is. Then we see Jesus, and then we understand that we are now like Him, because we recognize traits in Him that we are now experiencing for the first time.
- **Causal:** We find ourselves in heaven. Immediately we are in the presence of Jesus, and by seeing Him in His glorified state that same glory is supernaturally transferred to us. Thus it—our share in His glory—is not just a gift of heaven, but a gift of Jesus Himself.

This second interpretation seems preferable. And I think a passage from Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer" after the Last Supper supports this. [Turn please to John 17.](#)

Read John 17:22-24.

Jesus' context is eternity.

[Now let's return to our passage.](#)

This is also a "now—not yet" situation. Just as with sanctification, believers enjoy a *measure* of Christ's glory here and now. We have that because we are "in" Him, and He is in us.

But Paul's immediate context is the *parousia*, the coming of Jesus, both to take His church home during the Rapture, and to judge the world after the Tribulation. So he speaks of a glory unimaginable here on earth, something witnessed by Peter, James and John at Christ's transfiguration, where

His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. (Matthew 17:2)

Many around the world today speak of this being the "new normal"—by which they mean that things such as (for example during the previous eight years) low wages, low productivity, and high unemployment are the new normal; floods of illegal immigrants pouring across borders in Europe, and terrorists blowing up innocent citizens anywhere in the world, well, that is just the new normal, and something we must learn to live with.

We all look forward to the day when even the pleasant things of this world will have faded into insignificance and have been replaced by a true "new normal"—a new heaven and new earth, and an eternity with Christ Jesus living in His light, and His glory.

SESSION 48: AN IMMOVABLE FAITH

2 Thessalonians 2:15-17

PREFACE

I have just finished a biography of Benjamin Franklin, and during his long life he held to one overriding principle—that there was no principle above compromise. In our hallowed group of national forefathers Franklin was the great compromiser; no position held by anyone was above negotiating a middle-ground with another position. During heated debate in the Second Continental Congress and the writing of the Declaration of Independence, the peace negotiations with Britain, and the Constitutional Convention of 1787 to formulate the nation's Constitution, Franklin was the one who—to put it into our vernacular—would say, “Can’t we all just get along?” Franklin was the reliable conciliator during the many negotiations to establish this union of disparate states, as well as establish the brand new United States of America in the rest of the world.

Thus it should not be surprising that Franklin had no firm convictions regarding faith. He had, over his lifetime, what the recent biographer Walter Isaacson calls an “amorphous faith in a benevolent God” For him practical benefits always took precedent over spirituality, and this comes out in “his final summation of his religious thinking...the month before he died.”

“I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we render him is doing good to his other children.” [When buttonholed by the specific question regarding] whether he believed in Jesus, he answered that the system of morals that Jesus provided was “the best the world ever saw or is likely to see.” But on the issue of whether Jesus was divine, he provided a surprisingly candid and wry response. “I have,” he declared, “some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble.”

In less time than he may have anticipated—less than a month—that opportunity arrived for Franklin. And I have no doubt that in the end “knowing the truth” caused him more trouble than he had expected.

In v15 of our passage in this session the apostle Paul takes a different position. Those who call themselves Christians cannot compromise with the things of this world; they cannot compromise with other belief systems, other faiths. Followers of Jesus Christ—the Christ whom Benjamin Franklin realized just moments after he closed his eyes for the last time was indeed divine—are to stand firm on the precepts of their faith. There can be no “getting along.”

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

v15

I can think of no command by Paul more pertinent to our time. This society demands not just compromise, but that *Christians* be the ones to always bend, to change, to adapt to someone *else's* belief system. So v15 has direct application to our situation today.

So then, brethren, stand firm

“Stand firm” (*steko*) means just that: literally (be stationary, standing upright) or figuratively (standing fast, not bending, persevere). Paul states it even more forcefully in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

(1 Corinthians 16:13)

Think of standing in a river against a strong current, and leaning into it to remain where you are, rather than giving into the flow and being carried downstream.

stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught

Paul adds to “stand firm,” *krateo*, which means to seize or retain something; it can mean seizing to arrest, used in the narrative of Christ’s apprehension in the garden. Behind it is the idea of using strength. Put together we have a picture of strong, active resolve to stand for faith in Christ.

Notice that Paul in this letter, however, does not say that; he says that they are to “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught.” And then he defines for them which traditions he refers to.

the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.

Sidebar: All but the KJVs add either “by mouth” or “spoken” (ESV) because *logos* (word) is typically used to refer to something *said*.

Now I think it is necessary to translate “traditions” from our vernacular to that of the first century Greek. Probably the first thing that comes to mind for any of us when we hear the word “traditions” is *the way we’ve always done things around here*. Most of us at one time or another have done battle with traditions—more accurately, *traditionalism*—in the church. It can be a hot-button word.

Back in the mid-eighties, when I first sat in on a planning meeting for a church musical, and began offering some of my own ideas, I remember to this day one of the women there expressing in no uncertain terms that “That’s not how we do it here.”

That’s not what Paul is saying; that is not what “traditions” means here.

traditions = *paradosis* (par-ahd’-oh-sis) = from <G3860> (paradidomi); **transmission, i.e. (concrete) a precept**; specially the Jewish traditionary law :- ordinance, tradition.

The key to understanding how the word “traditions” is being used is right here in our text, beginning with “traditions which you were taught.” The word *paradosis* means something handed to another, as a teacher hands knowledge to a pupil.

Adam Clarke: The word *paradosis*, which we render tradition, signifies anything delivered in the way of teaching; and here most obviously means the doctrines delivered by the apostle to the Thessalonians; whether in his preaching, private conversation, or by these letters.

The word also implies on the part of a teacher that he is not expressing his own ideas, but is delivering or handing over a message received from someone else, such as what Paul explicitly states in 1 Corinthians and is typically stated when we take Communion.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:23.

He says it again in Chapter Fifteen.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul clarifies more explicitly his source.

For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11-12)

[Back to the Thessalonian letter.](#)

So when Paul, as in v14, refers to “our gospel,” it is not something he dreamed up on his own, but the gospel—good news—given him by Christ to deliver to the Gentiles. And, in his instance, it could be in one of two forms:

- **by word of mouth** Here he refers to his personal teaching of them while in Thessalonica.
- **by letter from us** His first letter, as well as the one he is writing at the moment and any subsequent correspondence. Note the distinction between “letter from us” (KJVs, “our epistle”) and what he wrote in v2 about “a letter *as if* from us” (emphasis added).

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2.

Others had been writing letters to the Thessalonians with spurious “traditions” while falsifying Paul’s name.

After the long passage describing the horror of the Tribulation, how millions would be fooled—even deluded by a spirit from God—into believing the lies of the Antichrist, Paul now calls upon the Thessalonians to stand firm on the truth from God that he had and is delivering to them.

And notice how we got from standing firm in the traditions Paul taught to standing firm in their faith in Christ. Paul received his traditions from Christ himself, so the two are synonymous. What He taught *was* Christ.

vv16-17

(For those who are of the opinion I spend way too much time on brief passages, let it be known that the late, great Charles Haddon Spurgeon—the nineteenth-century “Prince of Preachers”—delivered five separate sermons on these last two verses of Chapter Two. Be comforted that my typical verbosity will not reach that extent.)

Paul closes this second chapter with an earnest prayer—I would call it a benediction.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17.

Verse 16 is to whom the prayer is addressed; v17 is the entreaty. The emphasis in vv13-14 was on the centrality of God in all things: *He* chose us, *He* called us that we would “gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Verse 15 is Paul’s command to the Thessalonians—that is, what *they* are to do: Stand firm! But in vv16-17 Paul returns to the earlier theme, that ultimately it is all of God—*He* is the one who has loved us, given us comfort and grace, and who strengthens our hearts.

The Address

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father,

As is typical for many scholars and commentators, some have tried to make something of the fact that here Paul mentions Christ Jesus first, when in the first letter he reversed the order.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11.

But the evidence is that throughout his letters Paul writes it both ways, and I don’t believe there is reason to over-analyze this. The Father and the Son are One, and I would only note that but for Christ, we could not even call God our Father.

who has loved us

As Lange puts it, “The root of all is the unmerited love of God.” And Paul subtly expresses the oneness of the Father and Son, as the grammarians among us will have noticed, with the singular “has” (if he saw the Son and Father as two distinct entities he would have used “have”). But this is not a moment to be pedantic. The text declares that God *loves* us!

Spurgeon: I cannot help repeating my frequent remark that the love of God is a theme more fit for the solitary contemplation of each person than for public utterance or explanation. It is to be felt, but it never can be uttered. Who can speak of love? In what language shall we sing its sweetness? No other word, nor set of words, can utter its meaning. You may go round about and make a long definitions, but you have not defined it—and he who never felt

his heart glow with it will remain an utter stranger to it—depict it as you may. Love must be felt in the heart. It cannot be learned from a dictionary. “God has loved us.” I want you not so much to follow what I shall have to say upon that wonderful fact as to try and think over this thought for yourselves. God has loved us! Drink into that Truth of God! Take the Word, lay it under your tongue and let it dissolve like a wafer made with honey till it sweetens all your soul. God has loved us!

and [who has] given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace,

Still describing our Savior and God, and what He has done for us, Paul writes that we have received eternal comfort and good hope by grace. Again, “The root of all is the unmerited love of God” (Lange).

We are not just comforted now and then; children of God have an *eternal* comfort—the word means “perpetual, everlasting, since the world began.” And our hope is not just good in the sense that it is the opposite of bad, but it is blessed, it is a kindness, it is generous and overflowing. The child of God can spend every day, every waking moment being comforted and encouraged by the hope, the promise he or she has for this very moment—He is *with* us, right now—and the future—He is preparing a home for us to be with Him for all eternity ([John 14:2-3](#)).

The Plea

[may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father] comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.

I would like to close this by deferring to the venerable Matthew Henry (early 18th century) for his thoughts on the entreaty part of Paul’s benediction.

Matthew Henry: It is observable how comfort and establishment are here joined together. Note therefore, 1. Comfort is a means of establishment; for the more pleasure we take in the word, and work, and ways of God, the more likely we shall be to persevere therein. And, 2. Our establishment in the ways of God is a likely means in order to comfort; whereas, if we are wavering in faith, and of a doubtful mind, or if we are halting and faltering in our duty, no wonder if we are strangers to the pleasures and joys of religion. What is it that lies at the bottom of all our uneasiness, but our unsteadiness in religion? We must be established in every good word and work, in the word of truth and the work of righteousness: Christ must be honoured by our good works and good words; and those who are sincere will endeavour to do both, and in so doing they may hope for comfort and establishment, till at length their holiness and happiness be completed.

SESSION 49: PRAYER REQUESTS

2 Thessalonians 3:1-2

PREFACE

At the end of Chapter Two, Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, that “our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.” (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)

Now, at the beginning of Chapter Three, the last section of these two Thessalonian letters written from Corinth, he requests prayer for himself and his comrades—which would include, at least, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy.

v1

We learn so much from the apostle, but we learn more than just doctrine or prophecy. We learn priorities and character—we learn from Paul what should be of utmost importance in our own lives. Note what he does *not* request:

- he does not ask for good health
- he does not ask that his work load might be eased
- he does not ask for a safe journey to his next city
- he does not ask for relief from his aches and pains

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2.

I conducted my own survey on Paul’s closing prayer requests at the end of all his epistles and found only similar requests. His priority is clear: the advancement of Christ’s gospel and the building up of His church.

Don’t misunderstand: I am not suggesting that we never make such requests, especially in a setting such as a Sunday School class or other small group, or to a brother or sister in Christ. I just want to highlight that Paul desired that each church’s prayers for him and his fellows be focused on the success of their work for Christ; that was most important. Inconveniences, aches and pains, exhaustion were so far down the list he did not even mention them as prayer requests. Even the slightly more personal v2 remains focused not on removing a personal inconvenience, but on removing recurring obstructions to their ministry.

Paul eloquently summarizes his philosophy of service in his letter to the Philippians.

Read Philippians 1:12-21.

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored (ESV)

Frankly, I think the apostle Paul was a closet sports nut. If he were alive today I think he would be watching NFL football every Sunday afternoon, and certainly would be glued to the coverage of the Olympics—especially track and field events. Paul very often employs athletic imagery to make his point.

Here in v1 he uses two terms lifted from the world of athletic competition.

spread rapidly^{nasb. niv}, **have free course**^{kjv}, **run swiftly**^{nkjv}, **speed ahead**^{esv} = *treche* = apparently a primary verb (properly *threcho*; compare <G2359> (*thrix*)); which uses *dremo*, *drem’-o* (the base of <G1408> (*dromos*)) as alternate in certain tenses; **to run or walk hastily** (literal or figurative) :- have course, run.

Paul uses the same word several times in a more familiar passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24.

Therefore I **run** in such a way, as not without aim; I **box** in such a way, as not beating the air; (1 Corinthians 9:26)

glorified, honored = *doxazo* = from <G1391> (doxa); **to render (or esteem) glorious** (in a wide application) :- (make) glorify (-ious), full of (have) glory, **honour**, magnify; “this speaks of triumph” (Thomas), as in the triumph of the victor at the end of the race.

Does Paul want them to pray that *their* feet would be swift, that *they* would be honored? No, he prays that “the word (logos) [NIV, ESV, message] of the Lord” would do this. Perhaps Paul was thinking about the wonderful passage in Isaiah that speaks of this.

Read Isaiah 55:10-12.

just as it did also with you;

Paul reminds them of their extraordinary response to his teaching. They not only believed in Paul’s gospel—they ran with it!

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

They got it. Even in a time of tribulation, they embraced the gospel and then ran with it.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10.

By the time Paul arrived at his next stop, Berea, he was already receiving reports of the Thessalonians’ moving out into the Macedonian and Achaian region to share the gospel. They had already put into practice what Paul was asking them to pray—that the word of the Lord would “speed ahead and be honored.”

v2

Verse 2 is a reminder of where Paul was when he wrote this letter, and what he was probably seeing out his window and out on the streets when he went to the market: the citizens and culture of Corinth, the Las Vegas of the ancient world. And he describes what he sees—and those who were causing him severe problems.

and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.

This last week the ex-basketball player, Dennis Rodman, returned to North Korea to have chats with his good buddy, potbellied dictator Kim Jong Un. I do not follow Mr. Rodman, nor do I follow professional sports, but whenever the image of the basketball player is inflicted upon me by the news, my reaction is always the same.

My head snaps back in brutal astonishment over the things he has done to his appearance: an assortment of pins and rings and other sharp objects piercing his lips, nose, and ears; strange colors applied to his hair; his body covered in bizarre tattoos. And my response is always, “This guy is truly *strange*.”

In v2, where you read Paul’s first description of these individuals—the word “perverse,” “unreasonable” or “wicked”—imagine a picture of Dennis Rodman.

atopos = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and <G5117> (topos); **out of place, i.e. (figurative) improper**, injurious, wicked :- **amiss**, harm, unreasonable; unusual, outrageous, wrong [as in, “That’s just *wrong!*”].

I’m not suggesting Dennis Rodman is wicked; I know nothing of the man beyond what he looks like. But even in *this* strange world, I do suggest that in most settings Dennis Rodman stands out visually as “out of place.” And thus his *appearance* is a good illustration for this word. But Paul uses the word to express something more than someone just “out of place”; these are people who are injurious in their outrageousness; they enjoy inflicting harm.

The second way Paul describes those who were encumbrances to the spread of the gospel is that they were evil. And when one looks beneath the surface of this word, one sees that Paul is subtly setting up the topic he will address in the rest of the chapter.

evil, wicked = *poneros* = from a derivative of <G4192> (ponos); **hurtful, i.e. evil** (properly in effect or influence, and thus differing from <G2556> (kakos), which refers rather to essential character, as well as from <G4550> (sapos), which indicates degeneracy from original virtue); figurative calamitous; also (passive) ill, i.e. diseased; but especially (morally) culpable, i.e. **derelict**, vicious, facinorous; neuter (singular) **mischief**, malice, or (plural) guilt; masculine (singular) the devil, or (plural) sinners :- bad, evil, grievous, harm, lewd, malicious, wicked (-ness). See also <G4191> (ponerotos).

Robert L. Thomas: “Evil” speaks of persons not only themselves thoroughly corrupted but intent on corrupting others and drawing them into their own slide toward perdition.

But I mentioned that this word also connects up with the topic he discusses in the rest of this chapter. If one traces this word back to its roots—***poneros*** < ***ponos*** (labor, pain, toil) < ***penes*** (poor, indigent) < ***peno*** (to toil for daily subsistence)—one discovers the roots to the apostles thoughts regarding certain members of the Thessalonian congregation who were being slackers—i.e., *not* toiling for their daily subsistence.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:10-11.

for not all have faith.

The third way Paul identifies these troublemakers is that they were not men of faith.

faith = *pistis* = from <G3982> (peitho); persuasion, i.e. credence; moral conviction (of religious truth, or the truthfulness of God or a religious teacher), **especially reliance upon Christ for salvation**; abstract constancy in such profession; by extensive the system of religious (Gospel) truth itself :- assurance, belief, believe, faith, fidelity.

There are differences of opinion on who Paul refers to here. The statement, on its own, is undeniably true: not all men are men of faith. But we cannot disregard where Paul was while he was penning this letter; there were many Jews in the city of Corinth who vehemently opposed his teaching.

Read Acts 18:5-6.

Read Acts 18:12-13.

[stay in Acts for a moment]

If we understand this reference as one to unbelieving Jews—Jews who did not just quarrel with some of the doctrines of Christian faith, but who violently opposed Christ—then this wraps back to his description of them as “evil.” Remember how Thomas defined this word *poneros*: “persons not only themselves thoroughly corrupted but intent on corrupting others.” They chose not to trust in Christ, but their true evil is seen in their campaign to prevent *anyone* from believing in Him.

Back up to Chapter Seventeen in Acts. We have read before of the opposition that Paul experienced from the Jews in Thessalonica, who were not satisfied to just run him out of Thessalonica, but pursued him even to the next town, Berea, and ran him out of there!

Read Acts 17:5, 10.

Read Acts 17:13-14.

We are presently living in a period very much like what Paul experienced. Politically there are those, primarily on the left, who are not satisfied with simple disagreement; they must expunge from society, from the earth itself all policies and philosophies with which they disagree. And now, like the radical jihadists, they have begun taking steps to rid the earth of even the people who disagree with them.

In the area of religion and faith, we have the selfsame jihadists who do not believe in the philosophy of “live and let live”; they must kill anyone who disagrees with them.

The Jews chasing after the apostle Paul were not interested in healthy debate; just as with some other groups today, their purpose was the shut down debate—and kill the messenger of Christ’s good news.

SESSION 50: A HEAVENLY RELATIONSHIP

2 Thessalonians 3:3-5

PREFACE

I suppose it is because I am a writer, whose calling it is to choose words and string them together into a cohesive thought, that I notice how the writers of Scripture don't always string *their* words together as I would. Whenever I observe this, I naturally wonder, "Why?" And we have just such an instance before us in the transition from v2 to v3. Let's begin by reading the first paragraph of Chapter Three, and see if you notice what I did between v2 and v3.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5.

As we saw in our last session, as he begins his closing of this letter ("Finally, brethren,..."), Paul makes a request of the Thessalonians that they be in prayer for his ministry, that

- the word of the Lord would spread quickly and be honored
- they (Paul and his men) would be rescued from perverse and evil men who do not have faith. (plucked from a raging current; same word used in 1 Thessalonians 1:10—"...Jesus, who *rescues* us from the wrath to come.")

Since Paul begins v3 with "But," we naturally expect a contrast, and the logical one—especially as he is closing his thoughts with some encouragement—would be to contrast the lack of faith in these "perverse and evil men" to the faith of the Thessalonians. We expect, *for not all have faith. But you...*

Happily, the writers of Scripture listen to the Spirit, instead of human logic. Even though he is indeed sending them encouraging words, in the next three verses Paul emphasizes not them, but the Lord. Note:

But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. (emphasis added)

Paul contrasts the lack of faith in some men not with the real, yet fragile faith in other men, but with the steadfast, unblinking faithfulness of the Lord.

v3

In a sense, Paul answers his own prayer request. Immediately after asking the Thessalonians to pray that their work would not be stopped by evil, he assures them that *they* will be protected from evil by the Lord—which means that he and his fellows will be as well. And we today are the living proof that the Lord answered that prayer; the gospel was not stopped in Macedonia, but "spread rapidly" into all the world—not just the "known" world (the Roman world), but around the entire globe. This is because

the Lord is faithful

This is the adjective form (*pistos*) of the word for faith used at the end of v2 (*pistis*).

One of the more obvious threads that emerge from a reading of the Bible—especially the OT—is the contrast between the faithfulness of man and the faithfulness of God: Man is not, but God is. Man is repeatedly *unfaithful* to God (as well as other men), while God is unerringly faithful to His character and word. Even in His righteous judgment, inflicting wrath upon man (as we saw in Chapter Two) He is faithful, for He promised that He would do precisely that. The Lord God and His Christ have always and will always be and do as they say.

and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

In His faithfulness, the Lord God will strengthen and protect us.

strengthen, establish ^{kjvs, esv} = *sterizo* = from a presumed derivative of <G2476> (histemi) (like <G4731> (stereos)); **to set fast, i.e. (literal) to turn resolutely in a certain direction**, or (figurative) to confirm :- fix, (e-) stablish, stedfastly set, strengthen.

protect, guard^{nkjv, esv} = *phylaxei* = probably from <G5443> (phule) through the idea of isolation; **to watch, i.e. be on guard** (literal or figurative); **by implication to preserve**, obey, avoid :- beware, **keep** (self), observe, save. Compare <G5083> (tereo).

The probable root of this word (*phyle*) is translated tribe or clan, from which we get the idea of isolation, or kept from something or someone else, as in (originally in secular Greek) a clan bound together by common descent. (A *phylax* was a guard or keeper.) And from what does the Lord protect us?

The KJV translates this with the neuter “evil,” but most other translations favor the masculine “evil one”—i.e., Satan. And this makes sense; Paul has just finished in Chapter Two a long and detailed description of Satan’s handiwork during the Tribulation. Satan will always be found at the root of evil in this world.

Would that this verse was telling us that God would encircle us with an impenetrable wall through which evil and the evil one could not pass. How much easier our lives would be were that true. But I believe we find its true meaning here in the word “preserve”; the Lord will preserve us as we pass *through* our conflicts with the evil one.

Read Jude 24-25.

v4

In v4 Paul primes them for the final instructions of his letter. But again he places what he is about to say in the context of their mutual heavenly relationship. Forty-five times in his letters Paul uses the phrase “in the Lord,” as he does here. And that’s not just reflexive boilerplate; he doesn’t just rattle it off as mindless church talk. Paul, the Thessalonians, and all believers are *in* Christ. How we think, how we speak, how we act and behave, how we perceive the world around us are all *in the Lord*.

Paul has something important to say here, but first we should not miss how he is artfully setting them up for his final counsel—not just advice, but a “command.”

v4: We have confidence...

[that you] will continue to do what we command.

v5: May the Lord direct [you] into...the steadfastness of Christ.

v6: Now we command you...

Artfully done.

We have confidence in the Lord concerning you,

This phrase “in the Lord” works in a number of directions. I like what Calvin says about this.

John Calvin: Mark then the limits which he prescribes both for himself and for them: for himself, not to command anything but by the Lord: for them, not to render obedience except to the Lord.

that you are doing and will continue to do what we command.

Paul is “confident”; he is in a state of trust about the Thessalonian church. But this trust is based *in the Lord*: he trusts the Lord, and he trusts that what the church is doing is in the Lord. Based on this he has confidence to issue a command under his apostolic authority.

David Guzik: God doesn’t just pour spiritual maturity and stability into us. He works it in us through our cooperation with His will.

The older I get, the more I realize that this business of being a Christian is not as isolated and sterile as some believe it to be—that certain phrases such as “in the Lord” are not just mindless boilerplate, but literally describe the ideal relationship between the individual and his Lord. Because that is precisely what it is: not just a belief system, but a *relationship*.

Another standard phrase, our “walk with the Lord,” is key. As Guzik points out, it is *through* this walk, and our submission to His will, that the Lord develops our Christian character—this is how our *progressive sanctification* comes about. And in v5, one more bit of positive reinforcement before he sternly addresses bad behavior in their ranks, Paul encourages this “walk.”

v5

Paul ends this paragraph with a prayer, and although it is a wonderful thought, it has an interesting, different wording; I don’t recall hearing it put this way anywhere else in Scripture. Nonetheless it is sound counsel.

Read v5.

Again Paul places the emphasis on the Lord—*He* is the one who will “direct your hearts.” Moses said much the same thing to Israel near the end of the Law.

Read Deuteronomy 30:5-6.

May the Lord direct your hearts...

What good counsel for us today. Our hearts turn on their own accord and are pulled by external forces in myriad ways—most of which are neither profitable or righteous. Of course the reference here is not to the physical organ, but to that part of us in which our thoughts and feelings—our affections—dwell. May we all hand over all rights and rule over our hearts to the Lord. He alone will direct our path rightly.

hearts = *kardia* = prolonged from a primary *kar* (Latin *cor*, “heart”); the heart, i.e. (figurative) **the thoughts or feelings (mind)**; also (by analogy) the middle :- (+ broken-) heart (-ed).

into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

First we should address the discrepancy between the KJV—“patient waiting for Christ”—and the rest of the translations. The Greek is slightly ambiguous, but virtually all commentators, older and new, agree that it refers not to *our* steadfastness, but the steadfastness, or patience, of Christ Jesus.

steadfastness, patience, perseverance = *hypomone* = from <G5278> (*hypomeno*); **cheerful (or hopeful) endurance, constancy** :- enduring, patience, patient continuance (waiting).

I can think of no better nor profound reference to this than that offered by the writer to the Hebrews.

Read Hebrews 12:1-3.

There are a number of ways this could be interpreted and applied—it makes excellent food for contemplation and meditation—but let’s close with that offered by Albert Barnes, who keeps it in the context of the overall passage and letter.

Albert Barnes: The prayer of the apostle was, that they might have the love of God in their hearts, and “the patience of Christ;” that is, the same patience which Christ evinced in his trials. They were then suffering affliction and persecution. They needed patience, that they might endure their trials in a proper manner. It was natural for the apostle to refer them to the Saviour, the great example of patience, and to pray that they might have the same which he had.

Every time I read of or think about the vacillating disobedience of Israel in the OT, so quickly and easily leaving the side of Yahweh to dally in the ways of pagan deities, I try to remind myself: Am I so different? How much better would *my* life be if I subscribed to this prayer of Paul’s, that I would repeatedly, constantly, as a matter of habit direct my heart into—not *to* (i.e., up to), but *into*—the love of God and the steadfastness—the enduring constancy of Christ.

SESSION 51: UNDISCIPLINED SLACKERS

2 Thessalonians 3:6-9

PREFACE

There was a problem in Thessalonica. In his two letters to them Paul has been nibbling around the edges of this problem. Let's go back to the first chapter of the first letter.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:10b-12.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14. (adjective of *at'aktos*)

While in their midst, Paul did more than just preach this lesson; he *lived* it.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9.

Now, in the closing moments of what will probably be his last letter to them, Paul addresses this problem head-on.

v6

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6.

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Three things make it clear that Paul's "command" does not originate with him. First, the Greek word translated "command" means just that—the transmission, passing on, of a command from a higher authority, rather than an order originating from the one speaking.

command = *parangello* = from <G3844> (para) and the base of <G32> (aggelos); **to transmit a message**, i.e. (by implication) to enjoin :- (give in) charge, (give) command (-ment), declare.

Second, Paul explicitly reinforces this by adding, "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Christ is the one issuing the command *through* the apostle. Third, implicit in how Paul chooses to reference the Lord, he uses Christ's full title of authority.

During this period before the canon of Scripture was completed, when the only Scripture in writing was what we would call the OT, only a true apostle could say this, for only a messenger called by Christ Himself could speak *ex cathedra* as to how the church was to conduct itself. There is no one today authorized to do this; today the reference would be not to the authority of "our Lord Jesus Christ," but to God's holy (written) word.

Paul knew and acknowledged the difference between his opinion and his authority to speak in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:8-12. ("instructions" = *parangello*)

And what was this command from the Lord?

that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life...

On the surface this appears at first to be a rather generalized offense; after all, haven't we all been "unruly" or "disorderly" at times? But because of the immediate context of what follows as Paul expands his thoughts, we know—and the NIV and ESV translate it so—that he is referring to idleness.

unruly^{nasb}, **disorderly**^{kjvs}, **idle**, **idleness**^{niv,esv} = *atak'tos* = adverb from <G813> (ataktos); **irregularly** (moral) :- disorderly; **undisciplined** (military term for out of ranks).

life, live, walk = *peripateo* = from <G4012> (peri) and <G3961> (pateo); to tread all around, i.e. **walk at large** (especially as proof of ability); figurative **to live, deport oneself**, follow (as a companion or votary) :- go, **be occupied with**, walk (about).

In the following verses (vv7-12) Paul himself will define for us what he means by these words. He says that the rest of the church is to keep away from these individuals.

keep away from, withdraw from^{kjvs} = *stello* = probably strengthened from the base of <G2476> (histemi); properly to set fast ("stall"), i.e. (figurative) to repress (reflexive **abstain from associating with**) :- **avoid**, withdraw self.

But note that he still refers to them as "brothers." As with the Corinthian church, Paul is not telling them to utterly, permanently abandon these individuals, but to isolate them for the purpose of instilling discipline in undisciplined lives. It is for their own good, and the integrity of the church—as well as the name of Christ. David Guzik brings out something else.

David Guzik: In an indirect way, Paul showed that his vision for the church was that it should be such a place of love and comfort that it would be a significant deprivation to be put out of it. Churches today should also fit that description.

and not according to the tradition which you received from us.

Remember that the word translated "tradition" in this context simply refers to what Paul taught them when in Thessalonica. Beyond that, it refers to the way Paul *lived* while among them.

vv7-8

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8.

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you,

We really do not know for certain why these individuals were being lazy and not working to support themselves. Some conjecture that some in the church took what he had said in person to mean that the Lord's return was imminent. If so, they concluded, why bother working; just relax and wait for paradise.

That may be, but in what Paul writes in these letters about the end times he does not address that—in fact, quite the opposite. Both times when he addresses eschatological matters Paul tells us why:

1 Thessalonians 4:13 – some were concerned about those among them who had died before the return of Christ; would they be left out?

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 – some thought that Christ had *already* come, and they had missed the train; that the Tribulation had already occurred.

Neither of these reasons address the issue of someone becoming lazy because they assumed Christ's return was imminent. So while he speaks to the existence of the problem, I do not think Paul gives us a clue as to *why* these individuals (presumably men) were now chronically idle.

What *is* clear is that these idle members of the church were behaving this way while Paul was in their midst. This is at least one reason why he and his fellows dispensed with any need for the church to support them. So that they might be a healthy witness to the church, and specifically the lazy among them, Paul and his men worked to support themselves while in Thessalonica.

nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you;

In thinking through this situation, that certain men in the church were choosing to be idle, rather than be gainfully employed, I wondered, *So what?* Not that I thought it was all right, but who were they harming beyond themselves? Why did Paul consider this a problem worth addressing in his letter? And I believe he answers this question at the end of v8: "so that we would not be a burden to any of you."

Turn please to 1 Timothy.

In this letter to Timothy Paul counsels the young man about widows in the church; in so doing he offers us insight into the situation with the idle in Thessalonica.

Read 1 Timothy 5:3-4.

The local church is a family, and it has the obligation to look after the needs of those who have been left in bad straits. In a time and place without governmental safety nets, when women whose husbands had died faced the very real possibility of abject poverty, the church became that safety net.

But Paul counseled that the church should not take on this burden if the widow had immediate family—children or grandchildren. Those in her blood family were the ones to shoulder the responsibility. And he goes on to say that if the widow is younger, she should remarry, rather than become an idle gossip (vv11-15). Then, in v16 he reinforces this with a final injunction regarding widows in the church.

Read 1 Timothy 5:16. (NIV)

Paul's point in 1 Timothy—and the answer to my question, “So what?”—is this: The church has many legitimate burdens, such as seeing to the needs of older widows without any remaining blood kin. It doesn't need the unnecessary burden of widows who's families will not take responsibility for their needs. It doesn't need young widows with time on their hands spreading gossip and being busybodies. And, to the Thessalonian church, it does not need the extra burden of able-bodied slackers not willing to go out and get a job. [Back to v8.](#)

nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it

“Eat bread” is a Semitic idiom [\[a common, non-literal phrase\]](#) for eating any kind of food (Thomas); similar to how we might say in our vernacular, “break bread” (with someone). So Paul and his fellows obtained gainful employment during their stay in Thessalonica so as to be able to pay for their food. (He makes no mention of paying or not paying for their accommodations.)

v9

They did not do this because it was expected; nor is there any evidence that the Thessalonians were unwilling to support them. Quite to the contrary, the apostle and his men had every right to be supported by those to whom they were ministering. Not only was an itinerant apostle rightly to be supported (as Paul explained at length in 1 Corinthians 9), but even though they were in the minority at this church, for Jews even a total stranger was to be offered food and a place to stay. No, Paul had another motive.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:9.

My thinking is that any Jews or other Semites in that church were embarrassed that the evangelist was paying for his meals; in their culture it would have been a shameful thing. My guess is that they probably plead with Paul to accept their hospitality. But to Paul, creature comforts and traditional pleasantries took a back seat to proper instruction to converts, and to the health of the church.

Sidebar: I wonder if perhaps his environment and experiences in the city where he was writing this second letter might have influenced his decision to address this. Paul wrote both of these letters while he was in Corinth, and that church had a multitude of behavioral problems. Witnessing the many societal conflicts as he formed the Corinthian church may have sensitized him to the comparatively smaller problems in the Thessalonian church.

For the good of the church, as well as the individual offenders, Paul was willing to make himself and his fellows an example, a template, for good and righteous behavior—which was his *modus operandi*. Let's close with what he has to say about this in 1 Corinthians 9. Just after outlining in detail the rights due him as an apostle, Paul writes, in v15, “But I have used none of these things.” Then he describes his philosophy of evangelism.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:8-13; 9:19-23.

Paul was willing to work night and day for the privilege of being a living object lesson to those unwilling to work.

SESSION 52: UNDISCIPLINED SLACKERS, PART TWO

2 Thessalonians 3:10-12

PREFACE

Sometimes the apostle Paul addresses deep spiritual matters, topics of belief, faith, wisdom, or doctrine. At other times, as he does elsewhere in these two letters, Paul speaks of future, sometimes cataclysmic events in God's economy. But at still other times he gets very practical, exhorting his readers to conduct themselves righteously in their more mundane, everyday lives. In our text for this session we find ourselves still looking at this last.

Back in the 1980s, in another place and time, there was a talented woman who took the role of Mary in a production of mine. She had a lovely soprano voice and wasn't a bad actor. She did a good job with her role on stage, which involved playing the younger Mary at the time of Christ's birth, as well as the older Mary at His crucifixion. I had no complaints about her performance.

After it was all over she came up to me and expressed her willingness, should I ever need her for a part again. And I hadn't one moment of doubt: I would *never* ask her to work with us again.

You see, this woman always arrived for rehearsals just on time—never early. She always dragged herself in, with a pained expression on her face—as if she was always *down* with something, and was making the ultimate sacrifice and doing us all a huge favor by just showing up. Once the rehearsal was over, she immediately left—never helping to put back the platform furniture, close windows, etc. She was also in the bell choir with Linda and me. Anyone involved in a bell choir knows that it requires lots of preparation before, and lots of putting away after each practice. Tables must be set up, pads laid down, bells removed from their cases and arranged on the tables. After practice every bell has to be wiped of fingerprints, then be put back into its case, and then the tables taken down and stored.

This woman—an admittedly fine musician—invariably showed up for practice only *after* everything had been set up, and once the practice was over she invariably had a ready excuse for why she had to leave immediately, not helping to put everything away.

There were quite a few individuals in our acting company that were not as good on stage as this woman, but they were hard workers, doing everything they could to ensure the success of each production; they were committed to the work—and they were not prima donnas. Even though they may not have been as good at acting, I would have taken just a few of them over an entire company of individuals like her.

In our passage today, the apostle completes his remarks aimed at the slackers in Thessalonica, saying that if they would not pull their own weight, they should not be permitted to share in the bounty of others.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12.

v10

Let's refresh our memories about what the early church was like.

Read Acts 2:44-47.

This is a picture not of communism, but of *community*. Kindred souls serving and worshiping the same Master in authentic *koinonia*—fellowship: Sharing their lives with each other, helping each other and working together to understand and obey this new faith in Christ. At that time this fellowship extended even to the taking of meals together ("bread," here, is a Semitic idiom for any kind of food). This was a true, intimate community of believers—at that time almost a necessity for their mutual encouragement, and protection from those wishing them harm.

Today we may not take *all* of our meals together, but we have continued the tradition of coming together to meet the needs of those who, for whatever reason, are passing through bad straits, such as helping the older widow

who is without family (1 Timothy 5). But that same passage makes it clear that if the widow *does* have blood family, it is *their* responsibility to take care of her, not the church's.

We have a wonderful ministry in our church of men helping out other members with odd jobs. I was most appreciative when one of them came to my aid by replacing a few shingles on the roof of our house. Now, I can shingle a roof, and if the problem had been on the first or second floor, I would have done it myself. But this was on the *third* floor, and I needed the help of someone younger, more agile and less fearful of that height. The job was too small for a professional to consider it, so, instead, my brother in Christ took care of it for me.

One of the wonderful aspects of God's word is its practicality. It is more than just a collection of high-minded, ethereal Thees and Thous, but, as here, includes common-sense exhortations. The church is a family; it is to be based on love—not just the love of Christ for us, and our love for Him, but our love for each other. It is not to be a blind, indulgent love, however, a soft and syrupy love that facilitates sloth and idleness, but one that encourages good character and responsibility. Like Jesus Himself, who wasn't afraid to call a spade a spade, we are not to love someone into complacency, but to hold them accountable for their lives—and their sustenance.

Paul puts this in the form of a command, not a suggestion. "If anyone is not willing to work"—and I take this to mean both working in a domestic, paying-your-own-way sense, and contributing to the welfare of others in the church—"then he is not to eat." I like what Calvin has to say about this.

It is the inactive drones whom Paul is berating—those who live by the sweat of others while they themselves do nothing for the common good to help the human race, such as our monks and priests who acquire ample dimensions by their inactivity.

v11

Read v11.

Again, how practical God's word is. What invariably happens when we are not up to good? We are up to no-good. When we have time on our hands, we invariably spend that time poorly.

Guzik: There is a play on words between the ancient Greek phrasing in the lines not working at all and but are busybodies. The idea is something like "busybodies who do no business."

The ESV captures it nicely:

For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.

or the NIV:

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies.

Robertson: Literally, doing nothing but doing around. These theological dead-beats were too pious to work, but perfectly willing to eat at the hands of their neighbours while they piddled and frittered away the time in idleness.

an undisciplined life

This word is used only twice in the NT—both in this chapter (v6 and v11).

undisciplined^{nasb}, **disorderly**^{kjvs}, **idle, idleness**^{niv,esv} = *atak'tos* = adverb from <G813> (ataktos); **irregularly** (moral) :- disorderly; **undisciplined** (military term for out of ranks).

doing no work at all

And Paul is explicit about what he means by "undisciplined"; YLT translates this "nothing working." Zip. Zero. Nada.

but acting like busybodies

busybodies = *periergazomai* = from <G4012> (peri) and <G2038> (ergazomai); **to work all around, i.e. bustle about (meddle)** :- be a busybody; **to waste one's labor about a thing.** [only here]

v12

Read v12.

Now such persons...

Paul takes the diplomatic approach. If I were writing this letter and, for the second time had to address this situation ([less direct in the first letter \[4:11\]](#)), I would probably begin v12 with something like, “Now you clowns...” or “Now you worthless slugs...” But Paul takes the high road.

we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ

Nonetheless, the apostle’s correction of them is robust—but you might get the wrong idea if you are using an earlier version of the NIV (1970s), which translates this verse

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command...

The later NIV version translates this verse more accurately with

Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ...

Question: Aside from the word order, did you catch the difference?

In v6 Paul commanded the church “in the *name* of our Lord Jesus Christ” to “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life...” But in v12 he commands and exhorts “in the Lord Jesus Christ,” or your translation may be “in our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the first instance (v6), he commanded by his *authority in Christ*: “in the *name* of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the second (v12), he bases his command in the *common union of believers with Christ*. This might be translated, “by virtue of our union with the Lord Jesus Christ, we as fellow members of Christ command and urge such people...” (Hendricksen).

We get a sense, from these two verses ([v6 and v12](#)), of how important this is to the apostle—and how important it should be to us. He both commands and pleads with the church from the basis of his authority in the name of Christ, and from the basis of their family relationship in Christ Himself, that they not permit these individuals to live this way. (In the next passage Paul will issue explicit instructions for their discipline.)

to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

And here is the exhortation: get a job and work for your food.

Lange: Here the Apostle states the principles of a sound Christian support of the poor. The rule in 2 Thessalonians 3:10—“if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either”—goes back to the primary command in Genesis 3:19—“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”—that curse which yet is equally a blessing, and which is not to be nastily set aside under a pretense of spirituality, but in fact through fleshly indulgence and sloth. An excitement that does not go deep easily brings with it such disdain of outward activity, that a person fancies himself raised in heavenly rapture above labor, almost as if it were dishonorable. Here, then, the test is very soberly applied: Art thou raised also above eating?

Paul tells them not just to work, but to work quietly.

quietness, quietly, quiet fashion = *hesychia* (hay-soo-khee'-ah) feminine of <G2272> (hesuchios); (as noun) **stillness, i.e. desistance from bustle or language** :- quietness, silence.

I have already employed two illustrations from the stage; might as well round it off with three. There is a common phrase for someone who is flagrantly over-acting: they are said to be “chewing the scenery.” Paul says, *Don’t make a big deal out of it; just shut up and do your job*. This is in line with the exhortation from Jesus in His sermon on the mount.

Read Matthew 6:1-6.

This business of paying our own way so long as one is physically able was not just a matter of right and wrong, of morality, but also of *public relations*. In the first century—as, some might say, even now—the church was surrounded by those wishing it harm, looking for any excuse to bad-mouth it and bring public scorn down upon it. If you doubt this should still be a concern, look at how the press reports even the slightest moral indiscretion by spiritual leaders and compare that to how it reports moral indiscretions by public figures of its own ilk—i.e., liberal democrats.

If we claim to subscribe to the higher standard of God's word, then we must live it.

SESSION 53: DISCIPLINE FOR RESTORATION

2 Thessalonians 3:13-15

PREFACE

In this session we will look briefly at a topic which we will be examining more in-depth in our upcoming study of 1 Corinthians. But I did not want to wait until then to recommend a most remarkable book on the subject.

About thirty years ago I was up early one Saturday morning. I pulled a book from a shelf in our library and began reading—and I did not put down the book until I had read the last page. The emotional, honest intensity of the story grabbed hold of me and would not let me go.

Beyond Forgiveness, by Pastor Don Baker, is a true story of church discipline, carried out in obedience to God's word. Even today, when I turn to just about any page in the book, I am still moved by the powerful narrative of a pastor and a church pursuing the biblical discipline, and restoration, of one in its family—in this instance a member of the pastoral staff.

For anyone in the family of God, but especially for anyone who has struggled with the concept of church discipline, I heartily, unequivocally recommend this book. It can still be found in a number of places online, including through *Amazon* and *Barnes & Noble*.

Beyond Forgiveness: The Healing Touch of Church Discipline, by Don Baker. Multnomah Press, 1984.

In the passage before us today the apostle succinctly describes the essential framework of church discipline. In v12 Paul addressed the idle offenders; for this passage he addresses specifically those who will be, if necessary, disciplining these layabouts. To be precise, today's passage reiterates what he wrote when he launched into this topic, in v6.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6.

Now our passage for today.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:13-15.

v13

For this verse I prefer the KJV:

But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing.

Not only is this more eloquent, but there is a subtle improvement over the "of" in the NASB and NIV. It is, admittedly, a small point, but on occasion tiny two- or three-letter words in Scripture can carry more weight than we might at first think.

To my ears, "do not grow weary **of** doing good" suggests the picture of someone who *periodically* does good, and he is encouraging them to not be afraid to do it again, while "do not grow weary **in** doing good" (NKJV, ESV) suggests the picture of someone *actively involved* in doing good, and he encourages them not to stop.

Some place v13 as the end of the previous paragraph, but I think its content fits better with what follows, vv14-15. Doing good—*kalopoieo*; used only here—comes from the root *kalo*.

kalo = properly **beautiful**, but chiefly (figurative) **good (literal or moral)**, i.e. valuable or **virtuous** (for appearance or use, and thus distinguished from <G18> (agathos), which is properly intrinsic) :- x better, fair, good (-ly), **honest**, meet, well, **worthy**.

Why would Paul need to encourage his brethren to not grow weary in doing good, in doing that which is virtuous? Well, very often doing what is right and good in the eyes of the Lord—such as the topic at hand, church discipline—is not easy: either we give up in the middle of it, failing to see it through to the end, or we shy away from even initiating it. *(It's just too hard!)*

v14

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter...

Here the “anyone” refers to the unruly, the undisciplined, the slackers.

Question: And what was Paul's instruction to them?

v12: Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

If the offenders refused to change, the church was to

take special note of that person and do not associate with him

Not everyone agrees on the scope of “do not associate with him.” Some commentators believe that the correction here is the same as that that Paul prescribed for the Corinthian church: excommunication, expulsion from the church. Others say that the situation in the Thessalonian church was less egregious, and that the correction entailed not expulsion from the church, but more what we might refer to as giving someone the cold shoulder—i.e., not associating with them even though they remain in the church.

I'm not sure how this would work in practice: the individuals can still attend, but they are effectively black-balled, ostracized—the British would say they have been sent to Coventry. They would be ignored, and certainly be refused from the love feasts and accompanying communion. It seems to me, with treatment like that they would soon leave on their own.

Supporting the same excommunication argument, it is true that the Greek word translated “associate” here is also used in the passage in 1 Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-11. ([stay here](#))

associate, keep company = *synanamignymi* = from <G4862> (sun) and a compound of <G303> (ana) and <G3396> (mignumi); **to mix up together**, i.e. (figurative) associate with :- (have, keep) company (with).

Still one cannot miss the difference in the offenses—in Corinth, incest; in Thessalonica, idleness—and the difference in Paul's response. He is appalled not just by the sin, but the church's response in Corinth.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.

Compare that to the matter-of-fact tone of v14 in our text:

“If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.”

Sidebar: The Thessalonian letters predate the Corinthian letters by several years; they were written while he was in Corinth.

Perhaps more important than this apparent contrast is the similar goal for both. What they have in common is that they are discipline of a brother; even if one was more severe than the other (of which there is no certainty)—neither was meant to be (from the perspective of the church) permanent excommunication of someone who would henceforth be as a stranger. Both responses were intended for the good of the offenders, and for their eventual reintegration into the church body.

In the Corinthian case, "...so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." At Thessalonica, v15: "Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

v15

This goes all the way back to the Mosaic Law.

Read Leviticus 19:17-18.

The passage in 2 Corinthians that seems to be a follow-up to the discipline narrative in the first letter (not everyone agrees) clearly makes the point.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:6-8.

There are different forms of church discipline, but the purpose behind all is not alienation or punishment, but restoration. These two episodes, one in Thessalonica and one in Corinth, differ not just from each other, but from the detailed instructions given by Jesus in Matthew 18.

Read Matthew 18:15-17.

Though circumstances may differ, the purpose and goal of discipline in the church is always to be the restoration of a brother or sister—and a restoration of the body's communion with them.

Listen to the first part of the concluding chapter of Pastor Don Baker's book:

The silence of my study was interrupted by the persistent ring of the telephone.

A longtime friend from a distant city was calling.

"I'm sorry, Don, to interrupt your morning, but I'm interested in one of your people. We desperately need a staff man here, and it seems that from what I've heard, your man Greg meets the qualifications for the job."

I listened as he described their church and their needs. Then I asked the question that had to be asked—the last question in the world that I wanted to ask.

"Do you know that Greg has been under discipline here at Hinson for the past twenty-six months?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Do you know why?" I asked.

"I'm not sure I know the whole story, but I understand there was some moral problem in his past."

I then proceeded to tell him the entire story—all that I knew—in confidence. I have always been a firm believer in the necessity for correct information to be passed from church to church regarding prospective staff people.

When I finished there was a long pause, and then the question for which I had waited so long: "Do you think he is ready to go back to work?"

"Absolutely!" I answered. "He has undergone his discipline admirably. He has completed nine months of psychological counseling. He has proven his repentance and has completely forsaken his sin. He has assumed the spiritual leadership of his home and family. His and Joanna's relationship is stronger than it has ever been. He is displaying himself as a man of God. In fact, I think Greg is probably better equipped to serve Christ today than most of us who have never been through the terribly painful process of discipline and restoration."

It wasn't long before Greg received his "call" back to the ministry. He accepted with great enthusiasm.

The church was smaller than any he had ever served. The salary was barely adequate, but those things were incidental to the fact that Greg was being offered a second chance. He could hardly wait to accept it.

The night of their farewell finally came—twenty-six months and two weeks from the night of their humiliation. The church family crowded back into the same auditorium to face the same two people. This time, however, it was not with shame. It was with great joy. (from *Beyond Forgiveness: The Healing Touch of Church Discipline*, by Don Baker. Multnomah Press, 1984.)

In v15 Paul tells us that those that require correction and dissociation are not now our enemies or adversaries, but remain our brothers, our sisters. They are still members of the family. Pastor Baker in his book refers to the staff member caught in sin as a soldier fallen in battle, a comrade who must be rescued from the bloody field and put back together again.

All of this is to be done carefully and gently.

admonish, warn = *noutheteo* = from the same as <G3559> (*nouthesia*); **to put in mind, i.e. (by implication) to caution or reprove gently** :- admonish, warn.

Look at what Paul wrote in his first letter to the Thessalonians.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15.

To the church in Galatia he wrote

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.
(Galatians 6:1-2)

Discipline in the church is hard; that is because those who are doing the discipline—not just the leaders, but the church as a whole—are coming alongside the offender and sharing his burden. Brothers and sisters do not stand away at a safe distance, pointing an accusing finger and throwing stones; they come alongside and even as they admonish they are holding up, helping, loving. It requires effort, even pain.

This is one thing that sets the church apart from the rest of society—and, by the way, what sets the church apart from her Lord. When Jesus, on the cross, bore the burden of *the entire world's* sin, He bore it alone. Even His Father had to turn away. But because of that, we have each other, and when one of us is crumbling under the weight of *just his own* sin, the church comes alongside to share some of that weight—to reprove, yes, but also to help facilitate confession and repentance.

But in all this we must not forget the injunction to not associate with such a one, to “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life” (v6). Sin spreads faster than righteousness. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.” ([Galatians 5:9](#))

Even while loving and helping the offender, we must always guard the integrity of the body.

SESSION 54: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

The Thessalonian Letters

PREFACE

In the spring of 2016, as I was organizing and preparing this class, it never occurred to me that a study of these two, relatively brief letters would take sixteen months. But time and again, as I approached the next passage I had originally sectioned off, I realized I could not do it justice in just one session. So, looking at just the numbers, the file of my original notes now stands at 54 sessions, 234 pages containing slightly more than 102,000 words.

But the study of the Bible is not about the numbers; it is about acquiring a deeper, more solid understanding of what God has entrusted to us in His word. And my philosophy has always been, *If we are going to study it, then we're going to be as thorough as is practical, no matter how long it takes.* And I am most grateful that my immediate boss, our senior pastor, fully supports this approach. May his tribe increase (*which, I understand, it is*). Posterity will decide if this class has been a monument to thoroughness—or simply a monument to my verbosity.

The remaining three verses of the second letter, consisting of a closing benediction and Paul's personal authentication, are a little thin for even me to fill our time with. So what I want to do is commit most of this session to reminding ourselves what we have learned in these two letters.

Writing from Corinth, with Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy alongside, Paul wrote the first letter just a few months after leaving Thessalonica, and the second letter a few months after that; these are the earliest known letters written to any church by Paul.

how the Thessalonians accepted the gospel

Speaking personally, perhaps what has had the most profound impact on me was how enthusiastically and immediately the Thessalonians embraced the good news of Christ and shared that good news with their neighbors. We have read the passage from the first chapter so many times, we should have it memorized by now. First Paul speaks from his perspective:

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5.

Then in Chapter Two he testifies to their acceptance of his gospel:

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

After they heard and accepted the gospel of Christ, the Thessalonians immediately began spreading this gospel themselves, becoming "imitators" of the evangelists.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8.

And as a result of their eagerness to spread the gospel, they began to suffer the same persecution as the older churches in Judea.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:14.

This testimony is convicting. Many of us as well, in the beginning, were eager for our new faith in Christ. Our lives were changed, and we wanted to tell the world about this fresh joy. But as the years wore on this fresh faith of ours may have become a bit stale, a bit tired and worn. It became... comfortable.

Many years ago, in another place and time, though I was, my friends at the time had no idea I was a Christian—my closest friend and colleague did not know I was a Christian. Do yours? The Thessalonians could not wait to share their new faith with everyone in their region. And that faith spread, perhaps in no small part because of their witness. Would that that would be the result of *our* witness.

a selfless ministry

Christ and His gospel must always come first. One of the easiest ways to spot a charlatan is how they promote themselves, how they glean personal wealth from the flock, how they seek more glory for themselves than Christ. Paul did not do this when he came to Thessalonica. We have just finished studying how he and his men worked night and day so as to pay their own way while there. This was, at least, for the purpose of a positive witness to the idle layabouts in the church. But along with their manual labor, they presented themselves to these people with honesty, transparency, and seeking only Glory for the Lord.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:3-8.

This is especially remarkable considering where they had been and what they had experienced just before coming to Thessalonica. Publicly accused and beaten, then thrown into prison, Paul and Silvanus could not have been blamed if they had not looked for some compassionate pampering at their next stop. After their experience in Philippi, who could have blamed them for wanting an easier work load, generous and indulgent treatment. But they looked for none of this; instead, they placed an even *harder* burden on themselves for one reason: the cause of Christ.

the authority of God's word

Let's revisit v13 in Chapter Two. Even this week, after all this, as I began making these notes on this verse, I first thought this verse referred to the Bible. So I headlined this section, "the authority of Scripture." But God's *written* word is not what Paul is speaking of.

Read v13.

Paul writes "the word of God which you heard from us"—literally, "the word of hearing" (*logon akoes*). What Paul is saying—literally, because this, as most of his letters, were dictated to an amanuensis—is that when he and his fellows were standing in front of the Thessalonians, they were speaking to them *ex cathedra*—literally, "from the chair," but means speaking accurately, infallibly for God. They were not *reading* the word of God to them, as they would today, but were *speaking* the word of God.

But of course, what was spoken to the Thessalonians has been written for us. Both are true: Paul *spoke* the word of God, and then some of what he spoke was *written* as the word of God. But what I would like us to dwell on is the Thessalonian's *response* to this word—hence ours. And I can do no better than to reprise what Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote.

Spurgeon: The Word is twice mentioned in our version. "When you received the Word of God which you heard of us, you received it." In the Greek those are two different words altogether. The second, "received," might, perhaps, better be read, "accepted." I do not think that I should be straining a point if I read it, "You welcomed it." They first received it by eagerly hearing it. They wanted to know what it was all about. They were attentive to it and wanted to understand it. When they had heard it, they rejoiced, and said, "Oh, yes, yes, yes, this is the very thing we need!" They embraced it. That word will do—they embraced it! They put their arms around it and would not let it go. They were hospitable to the Gospel and said, "Come in, you blessed of the Lord. Come and live in our hearts!"

I would challenge every one of us, no matter our advanced years, to every day embrace God's word with this same unabashed exuberance.

So many today are of the mindset that once one has "accepted Christ," that's it. Done. Full stop. I'm good. But it is the exact opposite. Accepting Christ—accepting the truth of the gospel, as did the Thessalonians—is not the end; it is the beginning! It is the open door to a relationship with God, and the open door to understanding His written word. Love it. Embrace it. Don't let it slip out of your life.

the sequence of the end times

Perhaps the area in which we learned more of what we didn't know before, was in the subject of the end times and the *parousia*—the return of Christ Jesus to judge the earth.

Paul began addressing the topic near the end of the first letter, where he wanted to reassure the Thessalonians that those who had previously died would not be left out of the Rapture.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

Not only will the dead in Christ be included, they will be the *first* to meet the Lord in the air.

The common interpretation of this among pretribulational premillennialists is that this event—the Rapture of the church—will be instantaneous and precede all other events of the end times. That is, believers who are alive now will not be on earth for the Tribulation. This church's *Articles of Faith* spells out the details and Scripture references to substantiate this position. Here are the essentials. In order,

1. Jesus returns to remove His church (without touching down on earth).
2. This is followed by the seven-year Tribulation.
3. At the end of the Tribulation Jesus returns to earth (His “second coming”) with the saints.
4. There follows a one-thousand-year period with Christ and the saints reigning and Israel exalted (Christ's millennial reign).
5. Finally, a new heaven and new earth are established, Satan is defeated, and believers now in eternal state.

Making this more personal, if you are a Christian right now, here is the outline of your future:

1. Whether alive or dead at His return, at some point in the future you will meet Christ Jesus in the air and go with Him back to heaven.
2. For seven years you will be in heaven with Christ.
3. Then you will return to earth with Christ when He will judge the earth and reign on earth for one thousand years.
4. At the end of the Millennium there will be a new heaven and new earth, and you will dwell with the Godhead on a new earth in the Eternal State.

It is only fair to mention that historically the church has not subscribed to this interpretation of Scripture. According to Wayne Grudem, the classic, majority position of the church has been *premillennial* but not *pretribulational*—that is, Christ returns to take up the church before the Millennium, but *not* before the Tribulation. In this interpretation there is no pretribulation Rapture; Christ returns only once, in judgment, at the end of the Tribulation—at which time, according to this interpretation, the church is taken up, and immediately returns with Christ to rule during the Millennium.

After learning about the events of the Tribulation in Chapter Two of the second letter, it is my earnest prayer that we are correct. No one alive today will want to pass through this terrible time. No Christian wants to live under the thumb of the Antichrist, who will be in charge of things for at least the last half of the Tribulation.

A CLOSING BENEDICTION

Now let us close out this study with more encouraging news: Paul's authentication of the letter and his benediction upon the Thessalonians.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18.

Remember that earlier in this letter Paul had made a passing reference to forgeries.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3a.

As a way to authenticate his *real* letters Paul would close the letter—the bulk of which had been dictated to an

amanuensis—by taking the stylus and appending something in his own hand.

Read v17.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance.

Christ did not come to bring peace to the world; in Matthew 10 Jesus explicitly states that He did not come to bring peace between individuals, but a sword. The peace He *did* bring is our peace with God the Father. Paul states in his letter to the Colossians,

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.
(Colossians 1:19-20)

But this is still not the peace of which Paul speaks. His prayer for the Thessalonians is perhaps one of *our* most common prayers for each other. Based on the word translated "circumstance" or "way" (*tropos*), we could paraphrase this, "May Christ give you peace at every turn in your life."

The Lord be with you all!

And how does He accomplish this? He is *with* us.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

It is that classic choral benediction most of us grew up with, based on Numbers 6:24-26.

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord lift His countenance upon You,
And give you peace;
The Lord make His face to shine upon you,
And be gracious;
The Lord be gracious, gracious unto you.*

The apostle Paul's departing prayer for this church is that they would remember and claim the promise that their gracious Lord Jesus Christ is always with them. No matter where they are, no matter their circumstances, they need never be without the peace that comes from their relationship with God the Father through Christ Jesus.

Oh, that we would all remember this! No matter what we are going through, we are already in possession of a supernatural peace that will see us through any trial, any obstacle. All we need do is tap into it! It's already there.

Let's close with the promise Christ Jesus gave His disciples shortly before He was arrested and crucified.

Read John 16:33.

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BIOGRAPHY

We are David and Linda Lampel, and we live in a large country house in the rural area outside Winterset, Iowa, in the middle of the United States. Our home is surrounded by fields of corn and soybeans, and by dense woods that are home to deer, raccoons, possums, wild turkeys, woodchucks, coyotes, and myriad birds of all shapes and colors. The tranquility and beauty of this place contribute to what we do. In fact, we believe that the Lord brought us to this home because He knew that here we would best be equipped to serve Him and others.

Both of us work at home—Dave with his writing, and Linda (now retired) with her baking, needlework, and crocheting projects that are given to charities. Now that she has been unshackled from the business world, Linda has expanded our gardens, and has returned to baking all our bread—and spending more time with our family of four cats. The Lord has given us a good life, and we are most grateful to Him—especially for our 46 years together as husband and wife.

