

Bible Study Companion Series

The Thessalonian Letters

Verse-by-Verse

[online version]

Steve Lewis

*The Thessalonian
Letters*

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Cilician Gates from William Ramsay, "Cilicia, Tarsus, and the Great Taurus Pass," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Oct, 1903).

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Preface to the Bible Study Companion Series

Bible study is such an important activity because knowing and doing the will of God depends on an accurate understanding of His written Word. The obedient Christian life is based on the assumption that believers know the truth about what they are to obey. God has not been silent, and He has not left us without detailed instructions for living. We have God's complete revelation for us today in the Bible.

The Bible is a collection of writings that God directed and inspired men to write. It was recorded in the common languages that people used to communicate their ideas to each other. We must remember this as we study the Bible. The principles for Bible study follow the same rules we use every day to understand the meaning of any written communication.

As we study the Bible our goal should be to understand the message that the original text was intended to communicate. This means we are not allowed to make the Bible say what we want it to say. We must let the Bible speak for itself. The hard work of Bible study involves carefully examining the written text of Scripture in order to understand exactly what that text was intended to communicate.

Since the biblical authors used normal language, we must use the regular principles of grammar and sentence structure to understand the Bible's message. Scripture was not written in some secret code that requires a hidden formula to decipher. Instead it was written in the common languages of the

people who lived during those times (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). For that reason, this Bible Study Companion contains many references to the words, grammar, and sentence structure of the original languages. This is necessary because most of us are not familiar with the ways that ancient writers communicated, and these insights will help us to clearly understand their message.

We must also remember that the biblical writings were recorded at specific times in human history. They were written to specific readers in specific historical, geographical, and cultural situations. In order to understand the purpose and message of the Bible, we must also study the history, geography, and culture of the original writers and readers. The meaning of each biblical expression is influenced and even determined by the context in which it was written. As one scholar has said,

Just as we may be puzzled by the way people do things in other countries, so we may be puzzled by what we read in the Bible. Therefore it is important to know what the people in the Bible thought, believed, said, did, and made. To the extent we do this we are able to comprehend it better and communicate it more accurately. If we fail to give attention to these matters of culture, then we may be guilty of reading into the Bible our own ideas.

[Zuck, 79]

This Bible Study Companion will provide help as you go through the text of the Bible just as it was written, in a verse-by-verse manner. Since the original text was written and read in successive order, this companion guide will include definitions, concepts, and ideas that will help you to understand the meaning of the phrases and sentences in the order in which they unfold. It is our prayer that God will guide and direct your study of His Word so that you will experience the rich blessings that come from studying the Bible.

Background of the Thessalonian Ministry

The Thessalonian letters provide a wonderful, personal window into the early church as well as the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. These are “family” letters, written by a spiritual father to his spiritual children, and they are a blessing to have as part of our Bible. One commentator explained, “It is a genuine letter called forth by the warm spiritual ties that bound the writers to the readers. For its proper interpretation it must be read in the light of the historical circumstances that evoked its composition.” [Hiebert, 15]

A brief look at the Thessalonian letters makes it obvious that the apostle Paul is giving his reaction to events which happened during his time in Macedonia, as well as to the circumstances that followed his departure. His overall tone is quite positive and encouraging toward the Thessalonian believers, but he devotes at least half of each letter to sharing the truth about what occurred before, during, and after his brief time in Thessalonica. So, in order to understand the Thessalonian letters we need to understand the challenges the early church faced as they sought to be obedient to the commands given to them by the Lord Jesus.

After His resurrection Jesus spent forty days with His disciples, when He gave them what is known as the Great Commission. The apostle Matthew recorded this conversation: “And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the

name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mat 28:18-20). The Gospel of Mark records that Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15).

In the Gospel of Luke we see a brief glimpse of Jesus’ teaching: “Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things’” (Luke 24:45-48). Finally, just before His ascension into heaven, Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

During His own ministry Jesus had experienced strong opposition from the hardhearted religious leaders in Jerusalem. He told His disciples that they could expect similar treatment from the unbelieving world as they went out to share the gospel message. He had said, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me” (John 15:18-21).

The Book of Acts records the early history and the many challenges faced by the church as they attempted to faithfully spread the good news of what Christ accomplished for the world. They began to experience hostility from the same Jew-

ish religious leaders who opposed Jesus. For example, after Peter and John healed a lame beggar in the temple, Acts 4:1-3 says “As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening.” The following day all of the Jewish rulers and elders and scribes gathered together with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and all of the high-priestly family. After questioning Peter and John they “commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard’” (Acts 4:18-20).

As the ministry of Jesus’ disciples began to spread across Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, the Jewish religious leaders arrested the apostles and put them in jail. “But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, ‘Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life’” (Acts 5:19-20). After again questioning the apostles, the Jewish rulers “were cut to the quick and intended to kill them” (Acts 5:33). Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and the apostles were merely flogged, ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released (Acts 5:40).

Shortly afterward, Stephen, one of the deacons appointed for the Jerusalem church, was seized by the Jewish leaders and brought before the ruling council (Acts 6:12). He was falsely accused of defaming the temple and the law (Acts 6:13-14). Upon hearing Stephen’s eloquent defense, the leaders became enraged. They “covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside

their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:57-58). That young man, a fanatical Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus, would one day become known to the world as the apostle Paul.

Persecution broke out in earnest against the believers from that time forward. “On that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles....But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison” (Acts 8:1, 3). Shortly afterward Herod, the chief political ruler over the region at that time, ordered the arrest of several members of the Jerusalem church. As Acts 12:2-3 reported, “he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.” On the night before his execution, “Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison” (Acts 12:6), but an angel supernaturally rescued Peter from the prison.

Some time later, after the miraculous conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19), “immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’ All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, ‘Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’ But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ. When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him” (Acts 9:20-23). Saul escaped from Damascus, but when he began reasoning with the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem, “they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus” (Acts

9:29-30).

As the persecuted believers fled Jerusalem, many of them traveled to Cyprus as well as to the large cities in the north: Tyre, Sidon, and Antioch of Syria. At that time Antioch was the third most populous city in the empire (after Rome and Alexandria), and it had a large Jewish community. [Josephus] The believers began to share the gospel with fellow Jews as well as with God-fearing Gentiles, so that a healthy church began to flourish there. When the mother church in Jerusalem heard of this, they sent Barnabus to encourage and instruct the saints in Antioch. He immediately realized that more help would be needed, so he “left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:25-26).

The growing fellowship at Antioch was a spiritual powerhouse, and shortly it became the prime example of a missions-minded church. “While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2-3). This first missionary team traveled to Cyprus and then planted churches in the province of southern Galatia, which included the cities of Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13-14). Their mission, however, was not without its challenges.

They were opposed by a Jewish false prophet on Cyprus (Acts 13:6-12). Later, after preaching in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia, almost the whole city turned out to hear Paul and Barnabas the following week. “But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 13:45). They “instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district” (Acts 13:50). They preached in the

nearby city of Iconium, but “the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region” (Acts 14:4-6). In Lystra, however, “Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe” (Acts 14:19-20).

Paul and Barnabas eventually returned to Antioch of Syria to report their progress to the church. At the end of Acts 15 we see the church sending them on a second missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas separated, with Barnabas taking Mark to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas and traveled overland through Syria and Cilicia. Their journey took them to Tarsus, Paul’s home town, where earlier he had spent many years ministering prior to Barnabas bringing him to Antioch. From Tarsus they traveled through the rugged Cilician Gates on the inland highway to Derbe and Lystra, encouraging the new churches that had been established on the first missionary journey. At Lystra a young man named Timothy joined their team, and he was to become Paul’s protégé and ministry partner for the rest of their lives.

Although the Book of Acts contains limited details about the next part of their journey, we assume that Paul also returned to Antioch in Pisidia to encourage the members of that new church. Once they had accomplished the goal of visiting the existing churches in that region, they were faced with where to go next. One obvious choice would be to follow the highway west into the Roman province of Asia where there were several major population centers. All we know is that they were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in



The rugged road through the narrow Cilician Gates north of Tarsus

Asia” (Acts 16:6). Even though an enormous mission field existed to the west, the Lord communicated to them that it was not yet the right time to go into that area. Instead they followed a road leading north with the intention of sharing the gospel in another large province called Bithynia. “And after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas” (Acts 16:7-8). They had traveled hundreds of miles of highway without a positive direction for their ministry efforts, and even though they may not have understood it at the time, they were in exactly the right location for God to reveal their next step.

At Troas the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision. “When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:10). Paul, Silas, and Timothy had probably expected to spend their second missionary journey ministering in the vast area of what is today the country of Turkey, but the Lord had a different plan. He wanted the missionaries to



establish a foothold for the gospel on the European continent before eventually returning to the province of Asia. They set sail from Troas and landed at the seaport used by the city of Philippi in the province of Macedonia.

Since Philippi was a Roman colony populated mainly by soldiers and veterans, apparently there was not a quorum of Jewish males required for a synagogue there. The missionaries found an informal Jewish prayer place near the river where they led many of the God-fearing people to Christ. The events that occurred next are worth recounting in full, since it gives insight into one of the challenges faced by the mission team.



It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, “These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.” She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” And it came out at that very moment. But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.” The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and

proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely (Acts 16:16-23).

One commentator explained, “Although the reasons for the seizure were economic, the charges made were religious and political. It was illegal for Jews to proselyte actively among Roman citizens, and special reference was made to the Roman status of the Philippians.” [Kent, 136] The impulsive actions of the city magistrates would backfire when they learned that both Paul and Silas were Roman citizens whose legal rights had been violated. They had done nothing to deserve flogging or imprisonment, so they demanded that the authorities personally come to release them by way of apology. This precedent would ensure a measure of legal protection for the new church that had been established in Philippi. After encouraging the believers, they left Philippi on the famous Via Egnatia highway toward the west. Since Timothy is not identified by name on this leg of their journey, he may have remained in Philippi to continue ministering to the new church there for a short time.

Acts 17:1 says, “Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.” Thessalonica was a very different city than Philippi where they had first ministered. It was the largest seaport on the northern Aegean, and it was a major commercial hub with a cosmopolitan population. Ships from across the Roman world frequented the sheltered harbor there. “Thessalonica was made a ‘free city’... Unlike Philippi, no Roman garrison was stationed there, and in spirit and atmosphere it was a Greek rather than a Roman city.” [Hiebert, 16] At the time when Paul and Silas arrived, Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia, inhabited mainly by native Greeks while also having a sizeable Jewish colony. Acts 17:2 reports, “And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the

Scriptures.”

Paul’s synagogue audience was composed mainly of two classes of hearers, Jews and God-fearing Greeks. Members of the latter class, as usual, proved to be the most responsive to his message. They may have included some heathens honestly in search of truth, but the usual meaning of the term points to Gentiles who, disillusioned with their pagan gods and pagan morality, had been drawn to the purer ethical teachings of the Jews. [Hiebert, 19]

Paul and Silas won many converts, including “a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women” (Acts 17:4). It is likely that they remained in Thessalonica for some time after their synagogue ministry, extending their evangelistic efforts to the pagan population as well as instructing new believers in the truths of the faith. Shortly, however, “the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. 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.’ They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them” (Acts 17:5-9).

The Jewish religious leaders had cleverly crafted the most effective way to silence Paul and Silas. Their charges were political rather than religious in nature, and this was designed to capture the attention of the city authorities. As one scholar has said:

The charge must be set in the context of widespread unrest in the Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire. Jewish freedom-fighters were particularly active in Judea itself during the principate of Claudius, and their activity could not be contained within the frontiers of their native province. A militant



Ancient Roman forum in the modern city of Thessaloniki

messianism was working like a ferment among Jews of the dispersion, and the custodians of law and order in the imperial provinces and cities were not likely to draw a distinction between it and the “messianism” of Paul and his colleagues. In Rome itself there had been trouble of this kind quite recently, so much so that Claudius had expelled the Jewish community from the capital. [Bruce, 225]

The Thessalonian authorities decided to defuse the situation by having Jason post a bond guaranteeing the missionaries’ good behavior, which may have implied that Paul and Silas were to leave the city. So, the believers “immediately sent Paul away by night to Berea” (Acts 17:10) where Paul began to teach in that Jewish synagogue, too. The Jews of Berea were more noble in character and verified Paul’s message by studying the Scriptures for themselves. Many of them put their faith in Christ, along with quite a few prominent Greek women and men. “But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds” (Acts 17:13). The believers in Berea were concerned for Paul’s safety and immediately escorted him to

Athens in the province of Achaia. Apparently Timothy had rejoined Paul in Berea, so he and Silas remained there to strengthen the saints.

While in Athens Paul briefly ministered in the Jewish synagogue, the marketplace, and even at the Areopagus, the court of the Greek philosophers. Timothy and Silas found Paul in Athens, but immediately Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica while Silas returned to Berea or Philippi to continue building up the believers there. Paul journeyed alone to the city of Corinth where he reasoned in their synagogue, “testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:5). But as had been the pattern in other places, the Jews brought Paul before the Roman authorities on false charges which were immediately dismissed by Gallio, the Roman proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12-17). This was another important legal precedent that provided a measure of protection for the new believers throughout the region.

After Paul was separated from the saints in Thessalonica he had been constantly concerned for their well-being. They had all experienced the Jewish-led persecution, and Paul was aware of the more subtle and insidious schemes they had devised to oppose Christianity. As one commentator stated, Paul “had left them a heritage of suffering....If the Jews had hounded him all the way to Berea, what would they do to his followers who did not move? He could well imagine the bitter attacks to which they would be subjected.” [Hiebert, 24] Paul’s subsequent experiences in Berea and Corinth only increased his concern for the Thessalonians, and he anxiously waited in Corinth for Timothy to return with news about their circumstances.

When Timothy finally rejoined Paul, he shared an encouraging report. Things in Thessalonica were not as bleak as Paul might have imagined. Timothy reported many positive things, with only two or three issues which Paul would attempt to correct by writing to the church. Paul was relieved

and filled with praise to God as he began to compose his letter. Because he was still unable to return to Thessalonica personally, the Thessalonian letters were the most effective substitute for delivering his thoughts to them. Apart from the letter to the Philippians, the Thessalonian letters are some of the most personal and affectionate epistles in the entire New Testament.

The Message about the Messiah

As we saw in the last chapter, the hardhearted Jewish leaders were zealously opposed to the message of the gospel everywhere it went. We know that as soon as he arrived in Thessalonica, “according to Paul’s custom, he went to [the synagogue], and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ’” (Acts 17:2-3). From the beginning this was Paul’s normal practice because after his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus, “immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 9:20), and he “kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 9:22).

But how did Paul prove that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah? What passages did he appeal to from the Jewish Scriptures? Many people might be surprised to know that the Savior of the world was promised in the earliest chapters of the Jewish Torah. Immediately after the disobedience and Fall of mankind, God told the wicked tempter, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Gen 3:15). This is the first Messianic prophecy, and it specifies that the Savior will be the descendant of the woman.

Moses gives no explanation here, and none will be given for several centuries until the time of the prophet Isaiah – when he will prophesy in chapter 7 that Messiah is to be born of a virgin and have no human father. The virgin birth hinted at in this verse implies the humanity of the Messiah. The Redeemer will not be angelic nor simply divine, but will be a man. Thus, Genesis 3:15 lays the groundwork for the Messiah to be the God-Man. These ideas are further developed in subsequent prophecies. [Fruchtenbaum, 4-5]

Over the course of time, the progress of revelation would narrow the lineage of the Messiah to the seed of Abraham (Gen 22:18), then the seed of Judah (Gen 49:10), and finally to the seed of David (1 Chron 17:11-14). The Jewish prophets later provided a wealth of information about the Messiah, the majority of which would focus on His glorious second coming in power. But the apostle Paul probably appealed to the many prophetic passages describing Messiah’s first coming as the Suffering Servant. One scholar estimated that Jesus literally fulfilled over 100 Old Testament prophecies at His first coming. [Hitchcock, 4] Several representative passages are listed below:

- Isaiah 7:1-17 He will be born of a virgin
- Isaiah 8:9-10 He will be Immanuel, “God with us”
- Isaiah 9:6-7 He will be both human and divine
- Isaiah 11:1-2 He will be born from the line of Jesse,
David’s father
- Isaiah 40:3-5 He will have a forerunner who will prepare
the people for His arrival
- Isaiah 42:1-8 He is the Chosen Servant, anointed by the
Spirit, who will come in meekness to bring blessing for both
Jews and Gentiles
- Isaiah 49:1-8 He will first be rejected by His people but
will one day be accepted
- Isaiah 50:5-7 He will be despised, humiliated, and spit
upon

- Isaiah 52:14 He will be beaten and disfigured
- Isaiah 53:1-12 He will be lowly in appearance, despised and afflicted, experiencing sorrows and grief; His body will be scourged and pierced, and He will be considered a transgressor; He will be the righteous substitute to suffer the penalty for our iniquities in our place; He will be rejected and executed by His own people; He will be put to death among wicked men, but buried in a rich man's tomb
- Isaiah 61:1-2a He will be anointed by the Spirit to preach to His afflicted people
- Jeremiah 23:5-6 He will be fully human and fully divine
- Micah 5:2 He will be born in Bethlehem, but His existence is from eternity past
- Zechariah 9:9 He will come in humility, riding on a donkey
- Zechariah 11:12-13 He will be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver, which will be thrown to the potter
- Zechariah 12:10 He will be rejected by His people and His body will be pierced
- Zechariah 13:7 He will be a good shepherd who is put to death and His followers scattered

The Psalms also give important details about the Messiah's first coming in humility:

- Psalm 2:7 He is the Son of God
- Psalm 16:10 He will die but His body will not decay (implying His resurrection)
- Psalm 22:1-18 In death His hands and feet will be pierced; He will be forsaken by God, and mocked by His own people; onlookers will cast lots for His clothing

Using Scripture passages like those above, as well as the well-attested eyewitness accounts concerning the events of Christ's life, the apostle Paul had more than enough evidence to prove that Jesus indeed fulfilled all the prophecies of the first coming of the Messiah. This was the same approach that

was followed by others in the early church as they shared the message of what Christ accomplished for us. In one of his first sermons the apostle Peter said, “But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled” (Acts 3:18). Acts 8:26-40 records a time when Phillip the evangelist encountered an Ethiopian official traveling home from Jerusalem. This man had been reading from Isaiah 53, so “beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35).

During his first missionary journey, when the apostle Paul proclaimed the gospel in Antioch of Pisidia, Acts 13:13-43 records that he used several of the Scriptures listed above to prove that Jesus is the Christ or Messiah, including Psalm 2:7; 16:10; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6. On his second missionary journey after leaving Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens, Paul found himself alone in Corinth where “he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4). Later, after Paul had left Corinth, a disciple named Apollos arrived and “he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:28). The existing Old Testament provided many proofs of the messiahship of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, there were many people who heard these proofs of Jesus’ messiahship but did not respond in faith to the message of salvation. The history of the church in Acts identifies some of the characteristics which motivated their unbelief. In Antioch of Pisidia “when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 13:45). This is the same reaction that Paul saw in Thessalonica from the unbelieving Jews there (Acts 17:5). Jealousy was clearly a powerful motive, but it seems that the desire for power, position, privilege, and prestige were equally at play. Jesus acknowledged these corrupt human motives when He said, “You know that

the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them” (Matt 20:25). Whether among Jews or Gentiles, people in power desire nothing more than to remain in power. Anything which can disturb the status quo would be viewed as a threat to be neutralized as quickly as possible.

In addition to opposition based on fallen human motives, there was also opposition in the spiritual realm. Paul confirmed this fact in 1 Thess 2:18 when he said, “For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us.” Paul was also concerned “that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain” (1 Thess 3:5). In order for these brief statements to be meaningful, Paul must have already taught the new believers in Thessalonica about the spiritual forces set in opposition to God and the message of the gospel. In his later epistle to the Ephesians, Paul would tell believers to “put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:11-12). Most believing Jews or Gentile proselytes would have known about Satan from hearing Job 1 & 2 or Zechariah 3 read in the synagogue, but believers from among the pagan Gentiles would need to be taught about this spiritual aspect of the opposition and persecution they were facing as new Christians.

As well as using the existing Jewish Scriptures to prove the messiahship of Jesus, Paul and the other apostles were being given new revelation for the church age. In his later epistle to the Ephesians Paul explained, “by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed

to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit” (Eph 3:3-5). The new Christians in Thessalonica would have been taught not only from the existing Old Testament Scriptures, but they would also learn New Testament truths that were being revealed through the apostles and prophets. A surprising amount of biblical knowledge was shared in a very short period of time while Paul was with the new believers in Thessalonica. All of this revelation from God is what we now have available in its final form in our Bible.

Paul's Thankfulness for the Thessalonians

(1 Thessalonians 1:1-10)

In the apostle Paul's time, letters would start with what we might call the **signature** which tells who was writing the letter. The signature would be followed by the **address**, identifying the intended recipients. Then there would be a **salutation** that was often expressed using a form of the Greek word "rejoice" (*chairein*), which came to mean: "may you be glad" or "I wish you well" or simply "greetings." An **ascription of appreciation** would then give thanks for something the author appreciated about his readers. In his letters the apostle Paul would usually end that section by adding a **prayer** for the recipients. Then the main body of the letter would follow, with a conclusion that usually gave final personal greetings.

1 Thess 1:1 – Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

Here **Paul** identified himself as the author, as well as mentioning his two missionary companions. In the signature of his letters Paul would often include others who would have been familiar to the recipients. This does not mean that **Silvanus** and **Timothy** were the co-authors of the letter, but they were with Paul at the time he was writing and they would have been respected by the readers since both of those men had spent time teaching the believers in Thessalonica.

Paul always refers to Silas using his Roman name (Silvanus), while Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, always referred to him as Silas.

Paul addressed his letter to **“the church of the Thessalonians.”** The Greek word for **“church”** (*ekklēsia*, “called out ones”) was the normal term for a formal gathering of people, and it was also used to describe a political assembly of citizens who were called out to conduct civic business. But for the Jews and devout proselytes who attended the synagogues it also had a religious connotation. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint or LXX), *ekklēsia* was used for an assembly of Israelites. This term came to mean the assembled people of God, and this religious connotation was then adopted by the early church to mean an assembly of believers in Jesus Christ who came together as an organization for worship and service. Here Paul is addressing the local church consisting of all the believers in Thessalonica (see 5:27 where he commands them to read this letter to all of the brethren).

The phrase **“in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”** specifies the type of assembly or gathering that Paul had in mind. The church is an assembly of people who have been called out by God and reconciled to the Father through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As one commentator has said, “It is uniquely a Christian assembly, to be distinguished from all that is pagan or Jewish. ‘In God the Father’ distinguishes it from any pagan assembly or association, whether political or religious, whereas ‘and the Lord Jesus Christ’ distinguishes it from Jewish assemblies.” [Hiebert, 42] The sentence structure in the original language shows that Paul put the Lord Jesus Christ on the same level of equality as God the Father, which is a clear statement of the deity of Jesus. In the Septuagint the word **“Lord”** (*kurios*) was used to translate Jehovah or Yahweh, so Paul’s use of it here emphasizes Christ’s absolute deity. The name **“Jesus”** speaks of His humanity, while the

word “**Christ**” (“anointed one”) identifies Him as the Messiah, the long-awaited Savior and Deliverer.

At the end of this verse Paul gave his typical salutation: **Grace to you and peace.** In Paul’s time the salutation was often expressed using a form of the Greek word “rejoice” (*chairein*), but Paul adapted and deepened it by using the Greek word *charis* (a form of the word *chairein*). This word is translated “**grace**” and it is an important theological term which is defined as the unmerited favor of God. It is His goodness toward those who cannot earn and do not deserve His favor.

Among the Jews the customary greeting was the Hebrew word shalom, “**Peace.**” Here Paul used the Greek word *eirēnē* to communicate the deep inner sense of tranquility and well-being which is given to those who have been reconciled to God through what Christ accomplished on our behalf. The apostle Paul typically combined the two concepts of grace and peace in the salutation of most of his letters, and the order of the words is important. People cannot experience this type of peace unless they first receive God’s grace.

1 Thess 1:2 – We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers;

Here Paul began the letter’s **ascription of appreciation** in which he gives thanks for several of the qualities or accomplishments of his readers. Usually in Paul’s letters he would write one or two paragraphs about these things, but in this letter Paul felt compelled to spend much more time sharing his thoughts and reactions to what occurred before, during, and after his visit to Thessalonica. Paul begins his thanksgiving in this verse, then he continues it in 2:13 as well as in 3:9. In fact, Paul does not finish this section and finally share his **prayer** for his readers until the last three verses of chapter three.

“We give thanks” is from the single Greek word *eucharisteō* that means to be grateful or to express gratitude. Notice that his gratitude is directed **“to God,”** which acknowledges that neither the missionaries nor the believers themselves are ultimately responsible for producing any of the results that are worthy of thanksgiving. As one commentator explained, “By thanking God at the beginning of the letter, Paul lifts the thought above the human level. He is not trying to win the Thessalonians over by rhetorical flattery (cf. 2:5). On the contrary, he is sincerely giving the ultimate credit to the One from whom spiritual progress comes.”

[Thomas, 846]

Paul would give thanks **“always”** (*pantote*) which literally means “every when.” We could paraphrase this as “whenever Paul was at his prayers.” Paul was in the habit of bringing his thoughts, concerns, and desires to God whenever they came to mind. Either by speaking words aloud or simply thinking them to himself, it was almost as if Paul was in an ongoing conversation with God. In that sense, he was never truly alone and he was rarely out of touch with his Lord and Savior. Paul also gave thanks **“for all of you”** which can mean for each and every individual or for the entire group of believers collectively. The word translated **“for”** is the Greek preposition *peri* which typically means “around,” picturing how Paul was encircling them in prayer. He was consciously bringing them to mind, remembering and deliberately recalling the Thessalonians as he brought them before God’s throne with thanksgiving. **“Prayers”** is the Greek word *proseuchē* which is only used of prayer that is addressed to God. The preposition **“in”** (*epi*) focuses upon the occasion of their prayers. This implies that Paul, Silas, and Timothy would regularly come together for prayer as they remembered the Thessalonian believers with gratitude and petitioned God for progress in their spiritual growth.

1 Thess 1:3 – 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,

In the previous verse Paul said he was *always* praying, and in this verse he used a different Greek word (*adialeiptōs*) to emphasize how “**constantly**” he was remembering them. This term can mean unceasingly or by an unvarying practice. He wanted them to know that there is never an occasion when he forgets to mention them in his prayers. There are three specific aspects of their spiritual life that Paul referred to in this verse as being the focus of his gratefulness. In each case the second term expresses the source or inspiration for the first term.

“**Work of faith**” means that their actions were inspired by their faith in Christ. The Greek word for “**work**” (*ergon*) is a general term that refers to anything a person undertakes to do, and the grammar makes it clear that the faith of the Thesalonians was what motivated their actions. As one language scholar has said, “The genitives, of faith, love, hope, mark the generating principles of the work and labor and patience, which set their stamp upon each; thus, work which springs from faith, and is characteristic of faith.” [Vincent, 15] This simple three-word phrase expresses a profound truth:

What you believe determines how you behave.

We all choose to do things in ways that align with what we believe to be true – about ourselves, about others, about the world we live in, and about our relationship to our Creator. Our beliefs and worldview have a powerful effect on our everyday decisions and behavior.

In most of the apostle Paul’s letters the words “faith” and “works” are set in opposition to each other. In those places Paul is writing about a believer’s justification by faith alone apart from any works (e.g., Rom 3:28; 4:5; Gal 2:16). How-

ever, in Galatians 5:6 he said that “faith working through love” should be a way of life for everyone who has put their trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. Faith should work itself out in the life of believers through their choices and actions. This is exactly what was happening in the lives of the new believers in Thessalonica, and Paul is expressing his gratefulness to God for how He has worked in them. Upon believing the gospel, God had changed their outlook, which led them to behave in new, different, and righteous ways.

“**Labor of love**” indicates that they were engaged in exhausting toil which was prompted by sacrificial love. The specific word that Paul used for “**labor**” (*kopos*) is not simply a synonym for the word translated “work” above. The word here means intense labor accompanied by trouble, fatigue, difficulty, and weariness. The Thessalonian believers were wearing themselves out in the service of God and others. This word for “labor” emphasizes the true cost of their expressions of love.

The Greek language has several words that can be translated by the English word “**love**,” and here the term is *agapē*. This type of love is always contrasted with selfishness, and Jesus Himself described it when He said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). One lexicon explains it this way: “Christian love, whether exercised toward the brethren, or toward men generally, is not an impulse from the feelings, it does not always run with the natural inclinations, nor does it spend itself only upon those for whom some affinity is discovered. Love seeks the welfare of all (Rom 15:2), and works no ill to any (13:8-10); love seeks opportunity to do good to ‘all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of faith’ (Gal 6:10).” [Vine, 382] This kind of love is love in action for the benefit of others. It is a self-sacrificing love which follows the example of the Lord Jesus: “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for

the brethren” (1 John 3:16). Here Paul is giving thanks to God because the Thessalonian believers were demonstrating this kind of love by spending themselves in the service of others.

“**Steadfastness of hope**” conveys that their endurance under suffering was motivated by their hope of Christ’s return when He will bring believers into the very presence of God. The Greek word for “**steadfastness**” (*hupomonē*) literally means to abide under, and it carries the idea of patiently waiting while enduring suffering or affliction. Acts 17:1-15 describes the initial opposition and persecution endured by Paul and the Thessalonian converts as a result of their faith in Christ, but that suffering continued after Paul was forced to leave them. It was their “**hope**” (*elpis*) that motivated the steadfast endurance of the Thessalonian believers. One scholar says, “Hope relates to anticipations for the future, but biblical hope is always something that is completely certain. It is not mere personal aspiration or yearning for something to come; it is something certain because it is based on what God has said He will yet do.” [Hiebert, 51] It is a proven fact that people can endure almost anything if they have a guaranteed positive outcome to look forward to with anticipation.

Their hope was characterized by the joyful and confident expectation “**in our Lord Jesus Christ**” of their glorious future with Him. The phrase “**in the presence of**” is the single Greek word *emprosthen*, and the grammar suggests that it should probably be connected with what the Thessalonians were hoping. They understood that Jesus died as their substitute to pay the penalty for sin, and that He had ascended to the right hand of God the Father. But they also had been taught of His future return to bring believers into the presence of God. One commentator explained, “Paul is likely saying that our anticipation (hope) of the return of the Lord is to be fulfilled soon; He will then take us into the presence of our God and Father. This is what Paul seems to be saying when he uses the word *emprosthen* in 2:19 and 3:13. The

apostle asks, are not the Thessalonians his hope, joy, or crown of exultation ‘in the presence (*emprosthen*) of our Lord Jesus at His coming?’ (2:19). And he prays that God would establish their hearts unblamable ‘in holiness before (*emprosthen*) our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints’ (3:13).” [Couch, 51] Paul will later elaborate on this aspect of their hope (1:10; 4:13-18; 5:9), but here he is expressing thanks to God for giving the Thessalonians a hope that sustains them even under severe persecution.

1 Thess 1:4 – knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;

In this verse Paul continued his thoughts about the Thessalonian believers by sharing something that he knows to be true. The word “**knowing**” (*oida*) means to know something by observation. Paul just finished mentioning several of the things he had seen in the lives of these believers, and those things led Paul to conclude that they are beloved by God and that He had chosen them. He addressed them as “**brethren**,” which expresses the close family connection they now have in Christ. As one commentator says, “It is his happy acknowledgment that with him they have been born into the same family through faith in Christ; they were now members of the same spiritual brotherhood. This common spiritual experience caused the once proud Pharisee to welcome affectionately these once despised Gentiles as his beloved brethren. Insurmountable barriers between different groups have been effectively removed in Christ.” [Hiebert, 53]

Paul confidently concluded that the Thessalonians had been lovingly chosen by God. The word “**choice**” (*eklogē*) conveys the idea of God’s gracious selection of individuals. It is His determination to bless the chosen individual as an expression of His grace alone, apart from any merit in the person chosen. Theologians refer to this as the doctrine of election. One writer explained, “It seems obvious that doctri-

nal instruction had been given them on the point. The truth of election is a basic element in Paul's view of the church (Eph 1:4)...The reference is to God's gracious act of selecting them unto salvation, which took place in the council chambers of God in eternity past." [Hiebert, 54-55] Here Paul is saying that anything of worth that the Thessalonians have or have done is due solely to the fact that God set His love upon them and chose them to belong to Him. It is only in Him and through Him that they are what they are. Paul was grateful and praised God for the proof of this fact in the lives of the Thessalonian believers.

1 Thess 1:5 – for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

Another reason Paul concluded that the Thessalonian believers were among God's elect was because of how they responded to God's message of salvation through faith in Christ. The word "**for**" (*hoti*) is normally translated "because" since it typically introduces the cause or reason for something. In this verse Paul described how the gospel came to them, which provides supporting evidence that they were chosen by God. The word "**gospel**" (*euaggelion*) means "good message" and it includes the facts concerning Jesus' death on the cross to pay the penalty for sinful mankind, as well as His resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God from which He will return to gather His saints, and that reconciliation with God is freely available by grace through faith in what Christ accomplished for us. In his later letter to the Corinthians, Paul said, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4). He reminded them that this was the message

they believed and through which they received their salvation.

In the first part of this verse Paul was not focusing on how the *missionaries* came to them, but on how the *gospel message* came to them. The original language conveys a sharp contrast: “Not this, but that.” There were “**words**” that were spoken, because “words are basic to intelligent communication.” [Thomas, 848] But it was the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in their lives that brought about the full conviction of the truth of the message. “**Power**” is the Greek word *dunamis* from which we get our English word dynamite. It was the mighty energy of the Holy Spirit which altered their lives. As one scholar described it, “When the gospel is preached, God is there and God is working.” [Morris, 46] “**Full conviction**” (*plērophoria*) expresses the complete assurance that was given to them so that they could trust in the absolute truth of the gospel message.

In the second part of this verse Paul added, “**just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.**” This is the first time Paul hints at one of the issues the Thessalonians faced after his departure. As he will clarify later in this letter, his enemies were accusing him of impure motives. As one commentator says, “It is clear that the enemies at Thessalonica had sought to undermine the converts’ confidence in Paul, but the attack had not been launched against his apostolic authority. It was rather an attack upon his person, an attempt to destroy the validity of his message by discrediting his character.” [Hiebert, 41] But at the end of this verse Paul called on the Thessalonians themselves as character witnesses in his defense. He tells them that, just as he *knew* by observation (*oida*) that they were chosen by God (1:4), so they “**know**” (*oida*) by observation that Paul’s character and motives were fully in alignment with the powerful working of the Holy Spirit which gave them full conviction of the truth of Paul’s words. “The quality of life shown by

the missionaries had in itself been sufficient vindication of their sincerity and of the message they preached.” [Thomas, 848]

1 Thess 1:6 – You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

Here Paul says that the Thessalonian believers were so convinced of Paul’s noble character that they themselves sought to imitate it. “**Imitators**” is a translation of the Greek word *mimētēs* which sounds very much like the English word “mimic,” and it pictures someone who copies or follows the example of someone else. Paul and his companions became their model, not only for what Christians should believe, but also how they should think and act. This was a weighty responsibility, and the roles of parents are an apt analogy. In fact, Paul will use this analogy a little later in this letter to describe his concern for the Thessalonians. Paul then added “**and of the Lord**” because he wanted others to imitate him only as he himself imitated the Lord.

Paul knew the value of his own personal example. He was keenly aware that he represented Christ not only by what he taught but also by what he did (1 Cor 11:1). He was deeply conscious of the integrity of his own life (1 Cor 4:4) because of the power of the indwelling Christ (Gal 2:20; Phil 4:13). He therefore was bold to appeal to the value and importance of his example (1 Cor 4:16; Phil 3:17; 2 Thess 3:7-9). He did so because he was conscious that his own example pointed back to Christ. If his converts would truly imitate his example, they would go on to imitate his Master. [Hiebert, 60]

In the case of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, the Thessalonians had excellent role models for their devotion to Christ and their ongoing spiritual growth.

Paul mentioned that they had “**received the word**,” which is another way of saying that they heard, understood, and put their complete trust in the gospel message proclaimed by the missionaries. Not only did the Thessalonian

believers imitate the missionaries' character and lifestyle, but they were also called upon to imitate their endurance under pressure. They experienced "**much tribulation.**" The word "**much**" (*polus*) means great in magnitude or quantity, and "**tribulation**" is from the Greek word *thlipsis* which pictures intense compression or pressure. Its synonyms include oppression, affliction, distress, anguish, persecution, and trouble. We know that the unbelieving Jews incited a riot against Paul (Acts 17:5) and then followed him to Berea (Acts 17:13), so we can assume that they actively opposed the new believers who remained in Thessalonica. One commentator described the situation these believers faced: "The Jews among them must have felt the hatred of their unbelieving brothers in the flesh who, as has been pointed out, were especially antagonistic to the gospel in that city. The Gentile converts must have had to swim against the swift current of paganism that flowed like a torrent through the conduit of commercial Thessalonica." [Constable, 692]

Though they were under intense pressure, the remarkable thing is that they responded with an extraordinary measure of "**the joy of the Holy Spirit**" even in the midst of their suffering. Paul's frequent references to the Holy Spirit indicates that he had already taught them about the Spirit and that they were aware of His active presence in their lives. "**Joy**" (*chara*) represents a sense of cheerfulness, gladness, or calm delight that would be unexpected considering their circumstances. As the apostle Paul would later write to the Roman believers, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18). This was the same attitude that characterized the Thessalonian believers. They experienced inner peace in the midst of outer turmoil, which is the kind of reaction that only the indwelling Holy Spirit can create. The fact that the believers in Thessalonica stood firm in their faith even under the intense pressure of persecution

gave Paul further proof of their status as God's chosen and beloved children.

1 Thess 1:7 – so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

The characteristic which made the Thessalonian believers an example to others was the “steadfastness of hope” that Paul had just described when he said they “received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1:6). At the end of the next chapter in this letter, Paul is going to say even more about what the believers experienced and how they expressed their “steadfastness of hope.” The way these believers behaved, given their existing circumstances, became a remarkable, unexpected, and powerful witness to all of the believers across the region. The ones who were imitating Paul became people whom others would then imitate.

“Example” (*tupos*) pictures something that is produced by striking a blow or by extreme pressure. One scholar says, “Originally it denoted the mark left by a blow (as in John 20:25, where it is translated ‘marks’). Then it came to be used of a figure stamped by a blow, like the design stamped on a coin. From that it came to denote any image, whether stamped or not (as in Acts 7:43), and then a pattern (Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5). It comes to have ethical significance when it is used of a pattern of conduct, occasionally of a pattern to be avoided (1 Cor. 10:6), but more usually, as here, of an example to be followed.” [Morris, 49]

Paul said that their behavior became an example **“to all the believers.”** This implies that believers throughout the region were regularly receiving news about their brothers and sisters in Christ, even across vast distances. The ancient world was not as isolated as we might imagine from our modern perspective. Paul specifies that churches throughout the provinces of **Macedonia** and **Achaia** had heard about the faith of the Thessalonians in the midst of severe persecution.

The land area within these two provinces alone encompassed over sixty thousand square miles, including parts of the modern countries of Greece, North Macedonia, and Albania. Since Thessalonica had a busy harbor and was located on an important Roman highway, word about the events that occurred there may have traveled quite quickly. Other Christians in remote places may have been encouraged to think that if the Thessalonians could endure those circumstances, then maybe they could too.

1 Thess 1:8 – For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

Evidently the events in Thessalonica were so exceptional and noteworthy that they were published far and wide. Paul identified the subject of this news as **“the word of the Lord.”** Just like Paul’s expression in 1:6 (“received the word”) here “the word of the Lord” is another way of describing the gospel message proclaimed by the missionaries, and this news now included the story of how the Thessalonians behaved as they were transformed by God, even while experiencing harsh mistreatment from their opponents.

Paul wrote that their testimony **“sounded forth,”** and the Greek word *exēcheō* means that it reverberated from them like a clear trumpet blast or a loud thunderclap that echoed across the land. The salvation of the believers in Thessalonica was not something done in secret, but it was accomplished publicly so that everyone could hear about it and discuss the news wherever they went. Their destinations included the cities throughout **Macedonia** and **Achaia**, but the news spread beyond those provinces so that it was known **“in every place.”** This indicated that in every place where one could travel from Thessalonica, people were hearing about the Word of God and how the Thessalonians had received it.

One commentator said, “Some scholars think that ‘in every place’ is hyperbolic, but undoubtedly their witness had traveled far. We may never know how explosively the gospel traveled throughout the entire region, but it is a fact that the gospel of Christ moved rapidly by sea and land, and Paul could be far more literal than we might imagine.” [Couch, 57]

The news concerned their **“faith toward God.”** Literally the Greek phrase could be translated “the faith of you that toward the God.” As one scholar explains, “The repeated article makes clear that their faith is now directed toward the true God and not toward the idols from which they had turned (1:10).” [Robertson, 13] Paul’s brief words here are meant to include their entire story – how the gospel came to them and how they believed its truth, which led to dramatic changes in their outlook and priorities in life. For some reason the timing of the conversion of the Thessalonians was unusually significant. Everything that happened occurred at precisely the right moment in history so that their story would resonate across the ancient world. When you consider all of these facts, it makes more sense to recall that Paul was “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia” (Acts 16:6) and when “they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them” (Acts 17:7). In God’s eternal plan, Paul and his companions were needed in the province of Macedonia at that specific time.

Paul ended this verse by saying, **“we have no need to say anything.”** In any new place they would go and from the new people they would meet, they would hear about the events in Thessalonica before they even had a chance to say anything themselves. Paul and his companions were not the ones spreading the news because it often preceded them.

1 Thess 1:9 – For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how

you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,

Paul immediately resumed his thought from the last verse by giving additional support **“for”** (*gar*) his last statement, that the missionaries did not need to say anything about the events in Thessalonica. Others were telling the missionaries their own story. **“Reception”** is the Greek word *eisodos*, literally “way in,” which means the act of entering. As we have already seen from the Book of Acts, the history of their missionary journey included a sequence of amazing events leading up to their entering into ministry at Thessalonica.

There are two more things that others were telling the missionaries as part of the news they had heard from Thessalonica. The first is included at the end of this verse, and the second is given in the verse that follows. Here it says that the believers had turned “to or toward” God, which involved a corresponding turning “from or away from” idols. To **“turn”** is the important Greek word *epistrephō* which means to turn around or bring back, to make a change of substance, or reverse one’s course of behavior. In the New Testament it is often used as a synonym for spiritual conversion. The lives of the Thessalonian believers were changed in a way that caused them to live in a completely different manner. “Becoming a Christian involves a very definite break with non-Christian habits. Whatever the believers’ previous background, there must always be a turning from idols of some sort. The act of conversion involves a change of direction of the will. This is a decisive happening, a reorientation of the whole of life. This is so in every age, but especially was it true of Christians in the Greek world of the first century A.D.” [Morris, 53]

From our modern perspective we may not understand why turning **“from idols”** was so remarkable for believers in the Greco-Roman world. The society and culture of that time was permeated by paganism. Everyday life was driven by the fear

of the supernatural. Astrology, magic, and demonism claimed to control the unseen powers that governed life, and mystic rituals might bring good fortune. The common people tended to live in constant fear of capricious powers which might harm them, and even some of the Jews participated in the superstitious practices that were common in their society. Throughout the Roman empire idolatry was woven into the fabric of everyday life, with various altars, shrines, and temples found around every corner. It was definitely noteworthy when a group of former idol worshippers turned away from that aspect of their culture. It would almost certainly have been viewed as revolutionary. The Thessalonians began to “**serve a living and true God,**” which is in stark contrast to serving the dead and false pagan idols which previously governed their lives.

1 Thess 1:10 – and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

The second aspect of the Thessalonians’ conversion that others were telling the missionaries was that they were “**continually awaiting**” (present tense) the return of God’s Son from heaven. The Thessalonians had an attitude of expectancy concerning the future return of their Savior. This was an important doctrine that Paul, Silas, and Timothy must have taught, and they would have expected the Thessalonians to understand these truths from their previous instruction. It is clear that they believed in Jesus’ future return and were living in constant expectation of that event, so much so that it became part of the story that others were telling to the missionaries wherever they went.

In order to avoid any confusion about the identity of **God’s Son**, Paul added that he was referring to the One who was “**raised from the dead, that is Jesus.**” One commentator explained, “The resurrection of Christ is therefore the

ground and guarantee of His return. Had He not risen from the dead there could be no hope of His coming again.” [Hiebert, 74] Jesus’ resurrection and ascension were part of the message of the gospel, and it is the reason that believers are looking up in anticipation of His return from heaven.

Upon His return He “**rescues**” believers, and this is the Greek word *rhuomai* which means to draw away to oneself, to drag out of harm’s way, or to pull out of danger. Paul used the Greek preposition *ek*, meaning ‘out from’ or ‘away from’ which has the connotation of being separated completely from something. “**Wrath**” (*orgē*) refers to God’s righteous indignation toward sin and “the active opposition of a holy God to all that is evil.” [Morris, 55] But here it focuses on a specific time of wrath “**to come**.” As one commentator says, “This wrath is not the divine wrath that hangs over the heads of mankind because of sin (Rom. 1:18), as in the final judgment, but it is the wrath of Daniel’s Seventieth Week that purges Israel and also becomes a judgment upon the world (Rev. 6:12-17). The Church, the body of Christ, is rescued by Jesus before that day comes (1 Thess. 5:9)....Here Paul describes salvation as a rescue from the earthly wrath, the Day of the Lord (5:2), that comes upon the world.” [Couch, 59]

Notice that the return of Jesus will rescue believers, not *during* or *through* this future time of wrath, but to a place completely outside of or away from the wrath.

The waiting is for the Rapture, a point that Paul will develop later in this letter. The Rapture of the Church saints would be a mystery revealed primarily to Paul (1 Cor. 15:51-54)....The Rapture is to rescue the believers before the terror of the Tribulation begins. Some critics today see this doctrine as escapism, but the Thessalonians did not. They were serving while they were waiting; thus, they were doing both. The Thessalonians had been taught the doctrine of the Rapture, but they still had questions, as will be shown later. [Couch, 58-59]

Paul will describe this “**wrath to come**” in the last chapter of his letter (5:1-10). For now he briefly alluded to the fact that upon His return Jesus will rescue believers from this coming wrath, and apparently the Thessalonians’ expectation of this event became part of the story which was circulated far and wide across the region.

At the close of this chapter Paul was still in the midst of the letter’s ascription of appreciation in which he is giving thanks for many of the qualities that characterized the Thessalonian believers. As he begins the next chapter, Paul will continue by sharing his reaction to some of the things that happened while he was with them, as well as adding further thanksgiving and expressing his deep desire to see them again face to face.

Summary

As Paul began this letter to the Thessalonians, he praised them for the dramatic changes in their lives. Their new faith in Christ was noticeably impacting their behavior and lifestyle. Their sacrificial love motivated them to serve others to the point of weariness, and their hope in the imminent return of Christ gave them the perseverance to patiently endure persecution. Their godly reaction to affliction was so astonishing that news of their faith spread across the region. Everyone was talking about how they had turned to the one true God and away from idolatry, as well as how they were eagerly expecting Christ’s return to rescue them from the future judgment of the ungodly. In the next chapter Paul will share his reaction to the circumstances surrounding his ministry to the Thessalonians.

Paul Defends His Ministry

(1 Thessalonians 2:1-20)

In the last chapter we saw that Paul began the ascription of appreciation in which he gave thanks for the Thessalonians, and here in this chapter he continues that section of the letter. Paul is not finished giving thanks for them, since we see in 2:13 that he will add to his gratefulness to God, and he continues his appreciation for them through the end of chapter three. There he will conclude his thanksgiving to God and finally share his initial prayer for the Thessalonian believers.

As we begin chapter two, however, we see that Paul will elaborate on a theme that he first introduced in 1:5 when he said, “just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.” Here Paul will spend more time defending his ministry against the false accusations being made by his opponents in Thessalonica. “He is not providing this defense for the church but is answering apparent charges and rumors that are being lodged against him. At no time, however, do the believers appear to believe the lies. Paul simply wants to remind them of the truth lest they become confused.” [Couch, 71]

1 Thess 2:1 – For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain,

Just as He did in 1:5, here Paul again called on the Thessalonians themselves as character witnesses in his defense. He used the same word as before when he said, “You yourselves **know**” (*oida*), which means to know something by observation. He again addressed them as “**brethren**,” which ex-

presses the close family connection they now have in Christ.

The word “**coming**” in this verse is the same Greek word (*eisodos*) that had been translated “reception” in 1:9. It means the act of entering or beginning some activity. As we have already seen, the history of their ministry at Thessalonica was public knowledge and had become widely known across the entire region. The Thessalonian believers had ample opportunity to see the missionary team in action, and they themselves witnessed the visible results so they could attest to the effectiveness of the ministry which changed so many lives.

When Paul said that their ministry in Thessalonica was “**not in vain**” he used the Greek word *kenos* which literally means empty, fruitless, or without effect. The accusation that their ministry had been empty or fruitless was clearly a false charge. On the contrary, their ministry in Thessalonica had been full, fruitful, and successful in every possible way. This proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Paul and his companions were not deceivers or charlatans whose goal was prestige or selfish gain. “In refuting these enemy accusations Paul used the method of simply letting the record speak for itself....It was a masterly defense. It proved that the facts needed for the missionaries’ vindication were a matter of common knowledge.” [Hiebert, 83] In this first verse of the chapter Paul clearly denied one of the accusations – his ministry was not worthless.

1 Thess 2:2 – but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.

Verse two begins with a strong contrast (“**But**,” *alla*) by which Paul turned to one of the positive evidences for the sincerity of his ministry. He recounted the facts of his coming to them after they left Philippi. They “**had already suffered**”

(*propaschō*), which means to endure suffering beforehand, and the Thessalonians were personally acquainted with the fresh wounds on the backs of Paul and Silas when they arrived in their city a few short days after receiving the scourging at Philippi. They themselves knew how “the crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks” (Acts 16:22-24). In order to be perfectly clear, Paul added that they were “**mistreated**” (*hubrizō*), a vivid descriptive term picturing the insults, abuse, reproach, shameful treatment, and personal indignity they endured at Philippi.

Again, Paul called on the Thessalonians themselves (“**as you know**,” *oida*) as witnesses to these events. It may not be immediately evident why Paul then added, “**we had the boldness in our God to speak to you.**” One scholar explained, “It was unlawful to strip, beat, and imprison Roman citizens without a hearing, but in spite of the fact that this happened to Paul at Philippi, and in spite of the fact that it might have happened again at Thessalonica, that did not deter him from preaching the gospel boldly in the latter city.” [Ryrie, 32] Paul had experienced this kind of treatment on his first missionary journey, and he was well aware that preaching the gospel always carried the possibility of dangerous, even life-threatening, consequences.

A man with deceitful, self-seeking motives would never deliberately put himself in a place where there was a possibility of such violent treatment. But Paul’s unselfish motives led him to speak out again even though it could result in additional pain and suffering. “Their bold preaching after such experiences, when they were well aware of what could happen

to them, was the best proof that theirs was not a self-seeking, mercenary endeavor.” [Hiebert, 87] Their boldness was given to them by God who empowered them to continue the ministry to which He had called them. As the Thessalonians themselves knew, Paul shared the gospel “**amid much opposition.**” The word for “**opposition**” (*agon*) pictures a Greek assembly for their national games, and the term came to refer to any contest, struggle, or battle. The apostle Paul was actively engaged in a battle for the truth of the gospel.

1 Thess 2:3 – For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit;

In this verse Paul began to explain his inner motives – something to which the Thessalonians could not be called upon to witness. For the next few verses Paul will call upon God Himself to be the witness of the purity of his hidden motives.

As he did in the previous verses, Paul will first deny the charges being made against him before identifying the positive aspects of his ministry in the following verse. He used the words “**our exhortation**” (*paraklēsis*) which literally means “calling upon or calling near” for the purpose of encouragement, comfort, consolation, and support. This is not the approach of a deceiver or scammer who preys upon peoples’ fear, uncertainty, and doubt in order to get what he wants before quickly moving on to find new victims. Paul’s approach was quite the opposite. He came alongside the Thessalonians to patiently explain the gospel and to ensure that the believers were well-grounded in the truths of the faith. His early departure from them did not mean that he was surreptitiously sneaking away with his ill-gotten gain, as he will explain later in this chapter.

There are three accusations that Paul denied in this verse. First, “**error**” (*planē*) literally means wandering or being led astray, and it can include the ideas of deception or delusion.

One scholar explained, “It may imply deceit as accompanying or causing error, but it does not occur in the sense of deceit. Our exhortation did not proceed from any false teaching which we had ourselves received. We were guided by the Spirit of truth.” [Vincent, 22] So here Paul was denying the charge that what he was teaching was simply wrong, false, or untrue. In the next verse Paul will clearly identify the source and truthfulness of his message.

Second, “**impurity**” (*akatharsia*) comes from a word that means something which has not been cleansed from filth. It was used of both moral and physical impurity, but here Paul may be implying something different than sensuality. Later in his letter to the Ephesians Paul connected “impurity” with greed (Eph 4:19; 5:3), and that may be what he intended here. “Paul means that his exhortation did not proceed from greed for gain or lust for power.” [Vincent, 22] In Paul’s time, there were many traveling philosophers and charlatans who would gain peoples’ confidence, taking what they could from their victims before moving on to repeat the process. As one commentator explained, “The wandering sophists and jugglers resorted to all sorts of devices to attract people and so get their money. Not so the preachers. They had not tried to ensnare their hearers.” [Morris, 62] In this verse Paul flatly denied that he was simply one of those hated fraudsters.

Third, “**deceit**” (*dolos*) pictures someone baiting a trap in order to catch others through guile or craftiness. Paul is refuting the charge that he used some kind of trickery to attract followers for his own glory. As one commentator says, “Guile, craft, cunning imply deception, and can never be reconciled with that entire honesty which a minister of the gospel, and all other Christians, ought to possess.” [Barnes, 21] By denying deceit he affirmed his integrity and his honorable motives for sharing the word of the Lord with the Thessalonians.

1 Thess 2:4 – but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.

After having just declared three denials in the previous verse, here Paul gives a strong contrast (“**but**,” *alla*) and he will affirm that his motives and his methods “**have been approved by God**.” The word “**approved**” (*dokimazō*) means to be examined and confirmed by testing. It pictures the process of an assayer who crushes, melts, and tests mineral ore to verify the quality of the metal. In this case, God is the one who constantly tests and approves, using the Greek present tense to express continuous action. “Although God had approved them as His messengers, in carrying out their commission they stood under His continual testing. The consciousness of this fact made any kind of impurity or deception impossible for them. It is the most significant reason that they could not have been preaching from unworthy motives.” [Hiebert, 93] If God Himself had certified them, who were mere men to question their motives? God had “**entrusted**” (*pisteuō*) them with the gospel, which is related to the word “faith.” God was the witness who validated or attested to the faithfulness and trustworthiness of Paul and his companions for their task of proclaiming the gospel.

Again Paul used the familiar “Not this, but that” formula to first deny and then confirm his method for presenting his message. He claimed to speak “**not as pleasing men**,” and the Greek word *areskō* means to seek the favor of others or to accommodate to their preferences, longings, and desires. People-pleasing can cause someone to twist or bend the truth, and this was something that Paul and his companions were quick to avoid. In direct contrast (“**but**,” *alla*), Paul spoke only to please “**God who examines our hearts**,” using the same word (*dokimazō*) that was translated “approved” earlier in this verse.

Few temptations assail the preacher more strongly than this one to please men, even if God is not pleased, though with the dim hope that God will after all condone or overlook. Nothing but experience will convince some preachers how fickle is popular favour and how often it is at the cost of failure to please God. And yet the preacher wishes to win men to Christ. It is all as subtle as it is deceptive. God tests our hearts (the very verb *dokimazō* used in the beginning of this verse) and he is the only one whose approval matters at the end of the day (1 Cor 4:5). [Robertson, 17]

As we think about how this verse relates to the previous verse, one commentator has said, “Paul’s preaching could not have proceeded from error, for he was entrusted by God with the message. He was not impure, for he had been approved by God. He was not a trickster, for he aimed at pleasing God, not people.” [Morris, 63] It helps in understanding this section of Paul’s letter if we remember that he is defending himself against some of the accusations made against him by his opponents in Thessalonica. Paul will continue to do this in the verses that follow, but he will now call both God and the Thessalonians as witnesses to what they had seen and heard when he was with them.

1 Thess 2:5 – For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—

In this verse and the one that follows, Paul again issued a denial of the charges against him. He began by saying, literally, “neither once in words of flattery did we come.” “**Flattering**” is derived from the Greek word *kolax* which means someone who curries favor by expressing false humility or deference in a servile manner. This type of behavior was a common characteristic of the traveling charlatans who would defraud people for personal gain. Again Paul said, “**as you know**” (*oida*), which indicates that the Thessalonians themselves were eyewitnesses who could testify that Paul did not

behave this way.

He continued by denying yet another accusation: “**nor with a pretext for greed.**” The word “**pretext**” (*prophasis*) carries the idea of something that is put on as a false front to cover the true state of things behind it. “**Greed**” (*pleonexia*) is simply the desire for more and is often used in the context of desiring money. “Many of the Greek rhetoricians and peripatetic philosophers used their skills to defraud their followers, while wandering Jewish magicians, such as Elymas whom Paul encountered at Paphos (Acts 13:6-11), were even more rapacious.” [Hiebert, 95] It is almost laughable that someone would accuse Paul of preaching merely for monetary gain. Genuine Christian missionaries can barely eke out a day-to-day living, so they certainly are not using their ministry as an opportunity to build their financial net worth. At the end of this verse Paul declared, “**God is witness.**” As one scholar explained, “Paul feels so strongly his innocence of this charge that he calls God as witness (as in 2 Cor 1:23; Rom 9:1; Php 1:8), a solemn oath for his own veracity.” [Robertson, 17]

1 Thess 2:6 – nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.

Paul continued to refute the next accusation (“Neither ... nor ... **nor**”) by saying that he never sought “**glory from men**” (*doxa*), using a word that can mean approval, honor, praise, preeminence, prestige, or status. The lure of position and prestige are powerful motives, but here Paul denied the accusation that he ever sought that kind of glory, “**either from you or from others.**” Here he expanded his denial beyond the city of Thessalonica to include any of the other people to whom he had ministered. Paul never sought this kind of glory from men, and he did not need to because he had been commissioned for this ministry by God Himself.

At the end of this verse Paul mentioned something that he had not felt the need to raise earlier with the Thessalonians. Literally he wrote, “we were able to be weighty as apostles of Christ.” Here Paul declared that he was commissioned with apostolic authority. He used the Greek verb *dunamai* which means that he had the power or capability for asserting that authority. The word translated “**authority**” (*baros*) literally means weight, and it speaks of Paul’s rights as a designated representative of Christ. If anyone had the right to seek glory from men, it was the apostle Paul – but he never asserted that right in order to gain preeminence or a position of power for himself.

1 Thess 2:7 – But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.

The previous verses described what Paul did not do, but this verse begins with a strong contrast (“**But**,” *alla*) by which Paul will describe the positive ways in which he did behave while he was with the Thessalonians. Literally he said “we became **gentle** in your midst,” and the Greek word *ēpios* means tender, soft, or warmhearted in temperament. Paul immediately illustrated this behavior using the picture of a nursing mother who tenderly cares for her own children. This is an apt analogy because Paul, Silas, and Timothy were like spiritual parents to the new babes in Christ, so they nurtured and cared for them as they would their own physical children. As one commentator wrote, “He could not have claimed this in the letter if the Thessalonians were unable to confirm it with their own experience. He is thus only reminding them of facts they already know.” [Couch, 69]

1 Thess 2:8 – Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.

Continuing his thought from the last verse, Paul declared their “**fond affection**” (*homeiromai*) for their children in Christ at Thessalonica. As one scholar said, a loving mother is “not satisfied with nursing the child, but interests herself affectionately in all that concerns it.” [Vincent, 25] Here Paul went on to say that it gave them a great sense of pleasure and satisfaction, not only to bring them the “**gospel of God**,” but also to share their “**own lives**” with the believers in Thessalonica. They imparted or shared their lives in many ways that were never recorded in Scripture, but it seems that ultimately Paul and his companions would have been willing to die for their spiritual children if that became necessary. At the end of this verse Paul gave the reason for this aspect of their behavior toward them. It was because they had become “**very dear**” (*agapētos*), from the Greek word *agapē* which captures the highest form of noble, self-sacrificing love for others.

1 Thess 2:9 – For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

Paul now wanted his Thessalonian brethren to “**recall**” another aspect of his behavior while he was with them. It was Paul’s habitual practice to support himself and his companions by working at his trade as a tentmaker (see Acts 18:3; 20:34; 1 Cor 4:12; 2 Thess 3:8). Paul would later write to the Corinthians, “What then is my reward? That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel” (1 Cor 9:18). This was the way Paul deliberately chose to operate his ministry. He stated his primary reason in this verse when he told the Thessalonians, “**so as not to be a burden to any of you.**” Paul conducted himself this way in order to avoid any possible accusation that he was presenting the gospel for financial gain.

This made Paul's ministry much more difficult than it might otherwise have been. He described his efforts as involving **"labor and hardship."** The word **"labor"** (*kopos*) is the same word that Paul had used in 1:3 when he praised the Thessalonians' "labor of love," and we see exactly where they learned how to behave that way by following Paul's example. **"Hardship"** (*mochthos*) expresses the physical toll it took on Paul and his companions to become weary as they toiled to earn a living while at the same time ministering full time to the new believers.

Evidently his accusers were not aware that this was Paul's habitual practice, because the Thessalonians could clearly attest to the fact that Paul ministered to them without ever asking for anything. His careful financial practices completely nullified this particular accusation.

1 Thess 2:10 – You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers;

Here again Paul claimed that both the Thessalonians and God Himself were eyewitnesses of his behavior. He behaved **"devoutly"** (*hosiōs*), which comes from the Greek word that means undefiled, pure, holy, or pious. He also behaved **"uprightly"** (*dikaiōs*), which means justly, equitably, and righteously. Finally, he behaved **"blamelessly"** (*amemptōs*), which means that others could not point to any offensiveness in his behavior, making him free from criticism or condemnation.

1 Thess 2:11 – just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children,

In 2:7 Paul had illustrated his behavior using the relationship of a nursing mother to her children, and here in this verse he will complete that picture by adding the spiritual fa-

ther. He listed three things that a father would do for his own children. First, **“exhorting”** (*parakaleō*) is a form of the same Greek word he had used in 2:3 which means to call near for the purpose of encouragement and support. Second, **“encouraging”** (*paramutheomai*) means speaking in a way that exerts a gentle influence in order to soothe or console. Third, **“imploring”** (*marturomai*) means solemnly declaring the truth. One scholar noted that in the ancient world the father was responsible for the education of children, and he explained the father’s efforts on behalf of his children.

The meaning here is probably that Paul and his friends had directed the converts into suitable lines of conduct. “Comforting” is from a verb that...is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in 5:14 and John 11:19, 31. In the first of these passages it is used of comforting the fainthearted, and in John of comforting the bereaved; clearly it is well adapted to the thought of consolation. We shall not be far wrong in assuming that here it is used with special reference to those who found it difficult to live the Christian life in the face of the opposition they encountered. To them the apostles spoke words of cheer and inspiration. The third participle, “urging,” is from a verb that properly means “to bring forward a witness” and hence “to declare solemnly” (perhaps with the idea of calling God to witness); it has this meaning of solemn affirmation in other passages (Acts 20:26; Gal. 5:3). It is thus a good word to use for the solemn declaration of the truth (Best renders it “insisting”). It may refer to serious words addressed to slackers or the like. If Paul could be tender and considerate, he yet never lost sight of the high demands Christ makes on his followers. Thus all the encouraging and comforting and urging were directed toward the aim of seeing that the Thesalonians should “live lives worthy of God.” [Morris, 76-77]

1 Thess 2:12 – so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Here Paul finished the sentence he started in verse 10, and he shared the end result of a father’s involvement in the lives of his children. The goal is that they would “walk in a worthy

manner,” and the word “**walk**” (*peripateō*) is used figuratively for a person’s entire lifestyle. As one commentator explains, “A child walks worthy of a parent when he lives in such way as to reflect honor on that parent for the method in which he has trained him; when he so lives as to bring no disgrace on him, so as not to pain his heart by misconduct, or so as to give no occasion to any to speak reproachfully of him.” [Barnes, 24] In this verse Paul wants his spiritual children to live in a way that honors God.

At the end of this verse Paul transitioned from talking about what believers should do to honor God to what God is doing and will do for them. First, God “**calls**” (*kaleō*), and Paul used the present tense to indicate God’s continual, active work in the life of a believer through the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. One commentator explains, “The Thesalonians had of course heard and accepted God’s initial call, which first came to them through the preaching of the gospel. But God is ever calling believers to increased efforts and higher goals. The Christian life is a matter of advancement and growth...God’s call to His saints will find its consummation at the return of Christ.” [Hiebert, 110] This continual work of God in the life of believers is what empowers them to walk in a manner worthy of God. In the last chapter of this letter Paul will give additional instructions about how they are to walk. There he will say, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He **who calls you**, and He also will bring it to pass” (5:23-24). God’s calling work has both a present dimension and a future goal which will be accomplished when Christ returns for His saints.

At the end of this verse Paul used the Greek preposition *eis* which means to, toward, or with a view toward. God’s working and the believers’ walking are given a future direction and goal, which is the “**kingdom and glory**” of the Messiah.

Passages throughout the Bible describe Christ's return in judgment, power, and glory to establish His messianic kingdom on earth. This future outlook is made clear by the Greek grammar. "The two nouns, kingdom and glory, are closely connected as shown by the one article and preposition. This makes clear that the reference is to the kingdom as marked by the visible radiance of God's presence. Thus the idea is clearly eschatological. It is the kingdom and glory which will be manifested in all their fullness when Christ comes again. God's calling to believers looks forward to their intimate participation in the eschatological kingdom awaiting Christ's return." [Hiebert, 111] Several times in this letter Paul mentions that the hope of church-age believers is tied to the Lord's coming **for** His saints (1:10; 2:19; 4:17; 5:9), but after their glorification Christ will return **with** His saints to inaugurate His earthly kingdom in glory.

1 Thess 2:13 – For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

After having spent quite a bit of time defending his ministry from the false accusations of his opponents, Paul now continued his appreciation and thanksgiving for the Thessalonian believers. "**For this reason**" connects his gratitude to all of the circumstances he had just discussed. Again Paul assured the believers that he **constantly** (*adialeiptōs*) gives thanks to God for them (see 1:3).

Specifically, Paul was thankful that when the Thessalonians heard the word of God, they accepted it as God's own message to them. "**Received**" (*paralambanō*) literally means to take to one's side, to bring close, or to associate oneself with something. The Thessalonians had "**heard**" the

words from Paul and his companions, but they accepted them as being from God rather than merely words conceived in the minds of men. Apparently another of the charges against Paul was that he preached a man-made message which was completely in error (see 2:3). But that is not how the Thessalonians viewed it. One commentator says, “It is not a humanly originated message, like the teachings of the religious quacks and charlatans who were everywhere, exploiting gullible people with their pretensions.” [Heibert, 115]

In order to describe the extent to which they had received God’s word, Paul said that they “**accepted**” (*dechomai*) it. This carries the idea of receiving favorably, embracing, making something one’s own, with approval rather than rejection. Paul wrote, “**as it really is**,” using the Greek word *alēthōs* which means real, true, and certain. Not only is the word of God real and true, but it is also active. Paul said that it “**performs its work**,” using the single Greek word *energeō* from which we get our English word energy. God’s Word has an active power that effectively works to change the life of anyone who believes.

In saying that this Word works “in you” Paul is reminding his readers that they personally knew the operative power of it. The effect it had wrought in their lives was widely known; it turned them to God from idols, committed them to the service of the living God, and gave them the hope of the return of the risen Christ as their Savior from the coming wrath (1:9-10). Such a transforming experience convinces every believer that what he has accepted is truly the Word of God. No humanly contrived message can produce such results. [Heibert, 115]

1 Thess 2:14 – For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews,

The first word, “**For**” (*gar*), indicates that Paul will provide additional support for what he had just said. In 1:6 he had said that the Thessalonians became imitators of the personal character and lifestyle of Paul and his companions. But here in this verse he stated that they also became “**imitators**” (*mimētēs*) of the believers in the churches that are in Judea. From the very beginning the earliest believers had experienced opposition and persecution. This opposition continued as the gospel began to spread, according to Christ’s commission, “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The similarity between the Thessalonians and the early Christians in Judea was that both groups “**endured the same sufferings**” at the hands of their own countrymen. To “**endure suffering**” is translated from the single Greek word *paschō* which means to endure an experience that may be painful. The Thessalonians did not deliberately seek to imitate the example of the early church in that way, but they became unwilling imitators because of the pervasive opposition to their faith in Christ. As soon as he mentioned this persecution instigated by the Jews, it prompted Paul to take a short detour in the following two verses to describe the Jewish opposition and the eventual judgment that will come upon them from God.

1 Thess 2:15 – who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men,

Paul began by repeating almost exactly what he had heard Stephen the martyr say: “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become” (Acts 7:52). Paul heard those words as he stood among the members of the Jewish Council, who a moment later would give him their robes as

they picked up stones in order to murder Stephen. We could say that here Paul was describing not only the Jews but himself, as he had behaved before his conversion to Christ. In the section recounting the history of the Thessalonian mission, we saw that in every place the hostile Jews who aggressively opposed his ministry “**drove out**” Paul and his ministry partners.

Paul ended this verse by saying, “**They are not pleasing to God.**” These Jewish opponents were no longer seeking to follow after their God, and therefore they would not find favor and acceptance with Him. As one scholar says, “The rabbis and Jews thought that they were pleasing God by doing as Paul did when he ravaged the young church in Jerusalem. But Paul knows better now.” [Robertson, 22] The last phrase, “**hostile to all men,**” literally says that those Jewish opponents are “to all men antagonistic.” One commentator explained, “While beginning as a nation divinely called to be a separate people, the Jews had become a sinfully exclusive and bigoted nation. When God overruled their perverted nationalism they reacted in bitter hostility.” [Hiebert, 122]

1 Thess 2:16 – hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

Here Paul expanded upon the ultimate consequences of their bitter hostility. “**Hindering**” (*kōluō*) carries the idea of forbidding, preventing, or refusing to allow something. In this case Paul’s Jewish opponents were hindering the salvation of the Gentiles. “Their fierce opposition was due to the fact that Christian missionaries offered salvation to Gentiles without demanding that they first become Jews. Everywhere the Jews showed themselves wildly jealous of Paul’s success in winning Gentiles to the Christian faith directly. By their persistent opposition, the Jews deliberately sought to rob

Gentiles of the salvation in Christ that they resolutely rejected for themselves.” [Hiebert, 122] When expressed this way, their crime seems even more disgraceful.

The final result was that “they always fill up the measure of their sins.” The phrase “**fill up the measure**” is from a single Greek word (*anaplēroō*) which pictures the filling of a cup or bucket to the very brim so it is completely full. Every time the Jews opposed the gospel of Christ, they were adding to the full measure of their sins against God and others. In the final analysis, Paul declared that “**wrath has come upon them to the utmost.**” The term “**wrath**” (*orgē*) is the same word Paul used in 1:10 and 5:9 where he referred to the future judgment of God which would be poured out on a sinful world (see Luke 21:23; Revelation 6:16-17). The accumulating measure of their sins has condemned them “**to the utmost**” (*telos*) which has the idea of something coming to its final end point or consummation. God’s wrath will have reached its extreme limit and His judgment is inevitable. “Paul is saying that God allows His people to be persecuted sometimes in order to prove the evil nature of man and show the righteous character of His judgment when it comes (cf. Gen 15:16; Dan 8:23; Matt 23:32). God allows the wicked to fill to the brim (the compound *anaplēroō* implies a full measure) in order to demonstrate to all that His sure judgment is a righteous one.” [Ryrie, 42]

One commentator wisely said that “it must be remembered that this passage does not give Paul’s complete teaching concerning the future of Israel.” [Hiebert, 125] In fact, Paul gave preference to his own people throughout his ministry. It was his normal practice to go to the Jews first, then afterward to the Gentiles (Rom 1:16). The Israelites had every advantage when it came to receiving their Savior, and Paul said he would willingly trade places with them to be accursed if his people would accept their Messiah (Rom 9:3). It was his heart’s desire and prayer that they be saved (Rom 10:1). He

knew that “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew” (Rom 11:2), but “that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Rom 11:25). Regarding all Israelites left alive at the end of the Tribulation he declared that “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26).

1 Thess 2:17 – But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.

Here Paul returned to his previous train of thought (2:14). So far in this letter Paul had discussed the situation surrounding his ministry in Thessalonica, but he would now share his reaction in the aftermath of his departure from the Thessalonians. He again addressed them as “**brethren**,” which conveys the close family connection they now have in Christ. Paul’s feelings are clearly evident in his choice of words. The phrase “**having been taken away**” is from the single Greek word *aporphanizō* which literally means “orphaned away from.” Paul had already used the illustrations of a nursing mother and a reassuring father, but here he pictures the parents being torn away from their children.

By the time he was writing this letter Paul had been separated from the Thessalonians for many weeks, which Paul calls a “**short while**” (literally “a season of a time”). But he immediately clarified that their physical separation in no way meant that their “**spirit**” – literally, “heart” (*kardia*) – was separated from their beloved spiritual children in Thessalonica. This separation caused him to be even more eager to see them, and he used several strong words to express his desire – literally, “superabundant striving” with a “multitude of earnest longings.”

1 Thess 2:18 – For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us.

“**For**” is the Greek word *dioti* which is usually translated “because” or “therefore.” It was because of Paul’s powerful longing that they “**wanted to**” (*thelō*, wished, desired, or determined) return to them. In an unusual insertion Paul specifically emphasized his own personal longing to see them, which may have been his way of refuting the accusation that he himself did not wish to return and that he no longer cared about the Thessalonians. “His opponents charged that Paul loudly professed his unbounded affection for his converts while he was with them, but when danger arose because of his activities he promptly deserted them and fled. They implied that he was afraid to come back.” [Hiebert, 132] Paul made it abundantly clear that he fervently desired to return again and again.

At the end of this verse Paul attributed the many obstacles to the opposition of Satan. He does not explain how he discerned that these hindrances were the work of the enemy, but it may have come to him by way of revelation from God. As one commentator says, “Paul did not indiscriminately attribute all hindrances to his plans to the work of the devil. When he was prevented from preaching in Asia and Bithynia (Acts 16:6-7), he recognized the closed doors as God’s negative leading....At times he clearly recognized the hand of God in keeping him from certain courses of action. Here he knew that the hindrance was so manifestly satanic in origin as to leave the source undoubted. The indwelling Spirit enabled Paul to recognize the distinction between the two.” [Hiebert, 137] Even though this type of spiritual opposition is real, we must remember that God’s will and plan can never be hindered. Everything will happen exactly as He intended.

1 Thess 2:19-20 – For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.

After just expressing his deep longing to return to them, Paul turned to affirming his abiding concern for the Thessalonians. In these verses he will ask two questions and then clearly confirm the answer in a final statement. In the form of a question Paul shared three aspects regarding what these believers represent to him. They are his **hope, joy, and crowning achievement**. This is very similar to how Paul would later address the Philippian believers: “Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown” (Phil 4:1). The very existence of these believers has eternal significance for Paul and his missionary team.

Hope always looks toward the future, so here Paul would say that he eagerly hopes and joyfully anticipates the approval and commendation “**in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming.**” This clearly pictures the time when he will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10) after having been “caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (4:17). Paul’s beloved brethren in Macedonia represent the positive accomplishment and result of his efforts to live in faithfulness to his calling from God. These believers were extremely important to the apostle Paul. As one commentator has said, “His beloved converts are dear to him now as evidence that he is not running his race in vain (Gal 2:2). But in that day the sight of his converts with him in glory will truly make them his ‘crown of gloryings.’” [Hiebert, 138]

Summary

In this chapter Paul effectively defended his ministry against accusations made by his opponents who were enemies of the gospel. He had been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so he carried out his ministry with the constant awareness that God was watching. He never used any of the devious tactics that were common among the traveling philosophers and charlatans of his day. By contrast,

Paul gently cared for the Thessalonians as their spiritual parent, and he modeled the perfect example for them to imitate in their thinking, speaking, and behaving.

Paul refuted the charges of his enemies in defending his character and work. Several times he called the Thessalonians themselves as character witnesses who could vouch for the quality of his life and ministry. The chart on the following page shows Paul's defense against each of the charges brought against him.

Charges against Paul	Paul's defense
His ministry was fruitless or empty	The Thessalonians were witnesses of the powerful results of Paul's ministry (2:1)
He was an imposter; not telling the truth, but presenting a false message	He presented truth and was approved by God; entrusted with the true gospel (2:3-4)
He used the same methods as other traveling charlatans and scoundrels	They never used flattering speech or deception (2:3, 5)
He was greedy for wealth	They never came with a pretext for greed (2:5)
He sought influence and power	They never sought praise, prestige, or power over others (2:6)
He was dictatorial and authoritarian	They nurtured and cared for the brethren like a spiritual mother or father, although they could have asserted their authority (2:6-8, 11)
He was unwilling to labor or work	They continually worked to supply their own needs in order not to be a burden (2:9)
He lived a life of impurity and selfishness	The Thessalonians could testify that they always behaved devoutly, uprightly, and blamelessly (2:3, 10)
He only thought of self-preservation and fled in the face of opposition	Traveling teachers would never deliberately go where they might be mistreated, but Paul boldly spoke while knowing the severe consequences (2:2)
He did not care about the church or he would have returned to them	Paul had been forced out (2:15), and he tried more than once to return, but Satan hindered him (2:17-20)

Comfort from Timothy's Report

(1 Thessalonians 3:1-13)

In this chapter Paul will complete his ascription of appreciation in which he shared his thoughts and reactions to the events following his separation from the Thessalonians. In the previous chapter we saw that Paul's opponents had brought several accusations against him, and that Paul had launched his defense. His enemies claimed he had no concern for the Thessalonians, that he only thought of his own safety, he ran away in the face of opposition, and that if he really cared about them he would have returned to them. But Paul reminded them that he had been forced out (2:15), that he tried more than once to return, but that Satan hindered him (2:17-19). He ended by telling the believers that they are his glory and joy (2:20), and in this new chapter Paul will elaborate on that sentiment by sharing the depths of his emotion and concern for the Thessalonians. Here Paul will complete his defense and he will close this chapter with a prayer for the believers' spiritual growth.

1 Thess 3:1 – Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone,

Paul began this verse using the word “**Therefore**” to connect what he had just said to what he wants to say now. Here he will describe how he was feeling at that time, and then he will tell them what action he took as a result.

After waiting for a short while, Paul said that they could no longer **“endure”** it. The Greek word *stegō* originally signified covering over in order to keep out something (such as with a roof). But figuratively it came to mean covering with silence, bearing up under something, and finally enduring patiently. Paul realized that he was unable to continue patiently enduring the separation from his beloved converts. He recalled that he was still in Athens at that time, having been escorted there after the trouble in Berea, and it seemed like the best course of action for him to remain there. He gave hints about his frame of mind when he used the phrase **“left behind”** (*kataleipō*) which is literally “to leave down,” implying being forsaken or abandoned. And he added the word **“alone”** (*monos*) which means without a companion, forsaken, or destitute of help. It was obviously a difficult decision for Paul to be left alone in a culture permeated by a multitude of ungodly influences.

1 Thess 3:2 – and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith,

It was out of his desperate concern for the Thessalonian believers that he **“sent Timothy”** to return to Thessalonica in order to help the believers stand firm in their faith. He described Timothy as **“our brother”** (*adelphos*), recognizing him as a member of the family of God. Paul also identified Timothy as God’s **“fellow worker”** (*sunergos*) and Paul’s co-laborer in ministry as they spread the gospel of Christ. Paul gave Timothy his stamp of approval as an official member of the missionary team, and he would have been well-qualified to strengthen and encourage the believers in their faith. **“Strengthen”** (*stērizō*) means to make stable, place firmly, or confirm. **“Encourage”** (*parakaleō*) is the same word that was translated “exhorting” in 2:11 and it means calling alongside for encouragement and support.

1 Thess 3:3 – so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

Paul now shared his reason or purpose for sending Timothy. It was so that none of the believers in Thessalonica would be “**disturbed**” (*sainō*), which means agitated, rattled, or unsettled. He then identified “**these afflictions**” as the cause of their agitation, and the word “**afflictions**” (*thlipsis*) pictures the intense pressure of persecution or oppression. It is the same word he used in 1:6 where he said the Thessalonians had received the word of God in the midst of much tribulation. Paul’s concern was that the opposition and persecution faced by these fledgling believers might cause them to fall away from their faith. As one commentator explained, “When trouble comes, Christians often react by doubting that they are where God wants them to be; they often think that they have done something wrong and that God must be displeased with them....Yet storms often come to believers to make them able to stand firm, rather than to blow them away.” [Constable, 698] Another scholar wrote, “Human nature being what it is, we will learn some things only the hard way. If we are in trouble and need help and advice we do not run over our list of friends and say: ‘Ah, there’s so-and-so. Never had a day’s trouble in his life: he’ll be just the one to help!’ Rather, we know that there are qualities of character that are brought out only by affliction. In our hour of need, someone who has these qualities is invaluable (cf. 2 Cor. 1:4).” [Morris, 97]

At the end of this verse Paul again called upon the Thessalonians to recall what they had personally witnessed – “**your yourselves know**” (*oida*), meaning to know by observation. Not only had they seen it with their own eyes, but Paul had obviously taught them about the fact that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). He explained that believers will experience this because they

have been “**destined**” (*keimai*) or appointed for this, which comes from a word that pictures lying outstretched and vulnerable.

1 Thess 3:4 – For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know.

This persecution was not something that should have taken the Thessalonians by surprise, because when Paul was with them he kept “**telling in advance**” (*prolegō*), which means to say beforehand or predict. He said that they were “on the point of or about to” (*mellō*) endure something. The word he used was *thlibō* which is the verb form of *thlipsis* (persecution), and he called them as eyewitnesses who “**know**” (*oida*) that is exactly what occurred.

1 Thess 3:5 – 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.

Here Paul repeated himself briefly, recalling how he sent Timothy to them because he had come to the end of his patient endurance. He simply said that he wanted “**to find out about your faith.**” However, it is clear from the next part of the verse that Paul was concerned that they may have completely abandoned their faith. “**For fear that**” is the Greek word *mēpōs* which actually means “lest somehow or perhaps.” He wanted to be sure that the “**tempter**” (*peirazō*) had not ruined or negated all that the missionaries had accomplished. The Greek word *peirazō* carries the idea of putting someone to the test in a malicious fashion in order to break their commitment or subvert their faithfulness. He wrote of his “**labor**” (*kopos*) which is the same word he had used to describe the Thessalonians’ own “labor of love” (1:3), that pictured the fatigue, difficulty, and weariness involved in

their efforts at Thessalonica. At that point in time Paul had been concerned that all of their efforts might be “**in vain**” (*kenos*) or completely emptied of its accomplishments. But we know that as Paul began writing this letter he had been reassured that his ministry among them was **not in vain** (2:1). The next verse explains what happened to give Paul this assurance.

1 Thess 3:6 – But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you,

Paul had moved from Athens to the city of Corinth where Timothy found him. Timothy returned with “**good news**” (*euangelizō*), which simply means “glad tidings,” but it is used over fifty times in the New Testament to designate the gospel of God. Paul could now breathe a sigh of relief because Timothy gave a positive report of their “**faith and love**,” which Paul had already commended in 1:3. The tempter had not sabotaged or damaged their commitment to Christ, with its resulting life of faithfulness and concern for others.

In fact, Timothy reported that the Thessalonians always “**think kindly**” (literally, “have good recollections”) of the missionaries. Timothy found out that, as much as Paul longed to see the Thessalonians, they were “**longing**” to see him just as much. He used the Greek word *epipotheō* which is an intensified form of the word *potheō*, meaning a passionate yearning or desire. “He had evidently wondered how far the propaganda of his enemies had been effective. He had feared that his converts might now hold him in low esteem. But he was delighted to find that not only did they remember him, but that ‘you cherish happy memories of us’ (Phillips). The Thessalonians had not allowed hostile propaganda to distort their recollections of the visit of the great apostle. They still looked back on it with joy. They did more. They looked for-

ward with eager longing to a reunion, and were just as anxious to see Paul again as he was to see them.” [Morris, 101]

1 Thess 3:7 – for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith;

Timothy’s good report had an immediate positive effect on Paul and his companions. They were currently experiencing their own “**distress**” (*anagkē*, “dire straits”) and “**affliction**” (*thlipsis*, pressure from persecution), but in spite of all their troubles they were “**comforted**” (*parakaleō*) and encouraged. If their own dear spiritual children could maintain their faith while enduring affliction, then Paul and his missionary companions were encouraged to do the same.

1 Thess 3:8 – for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

This verse explains how Timothy’s good report brought Paul and his companions new vigor and strength as they continued to live out God’s calling for them. This encouragement refreshed them and gave them renewed energy to carry on. If their spiritual children were standing firm and steadfast in their commitment to the Lord, that was all the missionaries needed to know. As one commentator explained, “The thing that really made him rejoice, the thing that really strengthened him, the thing that gave him life, was the fact so clearly demonstrated by Timothy’s mission, that the Thessalonians did indeed believe. They had a strong tie to the Lord. Their lives were characterized by faith. This meant that they had a place in God’s kingdom, and this in turn indicated that Paul’s work among them had not been in vain.” [Morris, 103]

1 Thess 3:9 – 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,

Here Paul began by asking a rhetorical question that he will conclude in the next verse. In essence he stated that the Thessalonians' steadfastness gave him such great joy that it would be almost impossible for him to express it in words as they rejoiced before God. Any words of gratitude to God that Paul could muster would seem inadequate to express the overwhelming sense of joy that he felt because of the good news regarding their faithfulness. One commentator explained, "Another way to say this is that it would be impossible to give God all the thanks that He is owed, the task is so great." [Stallard, 56] This is one of those occasions when Paul would need to rely on the indwelling Holy Spirit, who "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" when we "do not know how to pray as we should" (Rom 8:26).

1 Thess 3:10 – as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?

Despite the good report given by Timothy, Paul still longed to visit the Thessalonians again. Over the course of his time away from them, Paul continually asked that the Lord might allow them to see each other again. One of Paul's main concerns for such a visit was that he could continue his ministry among them. He knew that there is always more to be achieved in the Christian life, and Paul desired to "**complete**" what may be lacking in their understanding of God's Word and ways. He used the Greek word *katartizō* which carries the idea of putting in order, knitting together, or equipping completely. As one commentator says, "Paul could desire earnestly to be with his friends and impart to them some spiritual gift. But he recognizes that their spiritual growth was in the Lord's hands, not his." [Morris, 108]

There was nothing lacking in the original saving faith exercised by the Thessalonians, so here it means that "whatever was deficient in their views of religious doctrine the apostle

desired to supply. It is to be remembered that he was with them but a comparatively short time before he was compelled to depart to Berea, and it is reasonable to suppose that there were many subjects on which he would be glad to have an opportunity to instruct them more fully.” [Barnes, 38] Paul considered the Thessalonians’ profession of faith in Christ to be the starting point of his ministry to them. The Great Commission had not yet been fulfilled in their lives, since it calls for making disciples of all the nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20).

1 Thess 3:11 – Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;

The words “**Now may**” mark the beginning of Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians. He addressed his prayer to “**our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord,**” which clearly confirms the deity of Jesus. As one commentator says, “For the apostle to invoke both the Father and Christ in his prayer implies the deity of Jesus Christ....The petition is addressed to both the Father and the Son though the usual Christian approach is to pray to the Father in the name of the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.” [Stallard, 57-58] The specific content of his prayer is given in the last three verses of this chapter. The first thing he mentioned was that God might “**direct our way**” to you. He used the Greek word *ka-teuthunō* which literally means “to make straight,” so Paul was asking that God might remove the hindrances that had prevented him from coming to the Thessalonians (see 3:1).

1 Thess 3:12 – 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;

Next Paul prayed that the Lord would cause their love to **“increase”** (*pleonazō*, “to have in abundance”) and **“abound”** (*perisseuō*, “to overflow beyond measure”). He clearly credits the Lord Himself as the One who works in them to produce this overflowing increase in their Christian **“love”** (*agapē*). The two objects of their love were to be 1) their brethren in Christ, then 2) all people without exception. One scholar explained that this kind of love “is love for people quite apart from their worthiness or otherwise, a love that proceeds in the first place from the loving heart of God. When the miracle takes place and someone passes from death to life, when someone becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus, then that person comes to see people in a measure as God sees them. He comes to love them selflessly. Paul has already recognized that the Thessalonians exercise this quality, and his prayer at this point is that they may increase in this divine activity.” [Morris, 109]

At the end of this verse Paul used himself and his ministry partners as an example of the kind of love he prayed they would have for others. One commentator says, “The love that the missionaries have toward their converts is presented as a model and measure for them.” [Hiebert, 165] In 3:9 we saw Paul express the intense joy that he experienced because of this kind of abounding love for his brethren in Thessalonica.

1 Thess 3:13 – 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.

Finally Paul prayed that God would **“establish your hearts”** (*stērizō*), by which he means that God would make them steadfast and certain in their faith, as well as settled and firm in their convictions. He desired that their behavior would be **“without blame”** (*amemptos*), which means free of fault and irreproachable. His goal for them would be a life of **“holiness”** (*hagiōsunē*) before God, which expresses itself

in purity of thought, word, and deed.

The demand for holiness is rooted in the fact that by virtue of his acceptance of the atoning work of Christ, the believer has been separated from the world and set apart as belonging to God. That which is devoted to God must be separated from sin. ... Sanctification is a progressive process in the life of a believer, but here Paul has in mind that future day when the Lord will transform and gather all His saints. As Jesus Himself promised, "I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3). Paul's prayer for the Thessalonian believers is that in that day their hearts will be established unblameable in holiness in the presence of our Lord Jesus. ... Their glorification that day will mark the consummation of the present growth in holiness, and fully qualify them to return with their glorious Redeemer and Lord in open glory to inaugurate His world-wide reign. [Hiebert, 166-168]

At the end of every chapter in this letter the apostle Paul mentioned the future coming of Christ. Here in regard to Paul's phrase, "**at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints,**" one scholar explained the timing as it relates to the wider prophetic plan of God.

We believe in the imminent return of Christ, that 1 Thessalonians 4 is going to be fulfilled, that the dead in Christ are going to arise, and that living Christians will be translated without dying into the presence of God. We further believe that after this event there will take place a great time of trouble in the world, predicted by Daniel and Christ Himself, culminating in the great tribulation. We believe that at the end of the great tribulation Christ is coming back in power and glory from heaven with the saints and with the holy angels and that He will establish His righteous government on the earth as predicted many times in the Bible, which will last, according to Revelation 20, for one thousand years and ultimately will be followed by the eternal state after the judgment of the great white throne. Where does this passage fit into this background?...Just when will Christians be presented unblameable in holiness before God? If we believe that Christ is coming before the great tribulation, we are going to be presented unblameable in holiness before God long before His second coming to set up His kingdom. ... According to Scrip-

ture, Christians are going to meet Christ in the air. We are going to be present with Him at that moment. After we meet Him in the air, He will take us home to glory to be in the presence of the Father and the holy angels. After that we are coming back to the earth with Christ. This word coming here may not refer specifically to the coming of Christ with His saints to the earth, but rather the coming to heaven when they will be in the presence of the Father. That is the same thought considered in 2:19, “in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming,” literally, “before our Lord Jesus Christ in his presence.” In 3:13, the verse, translated literally, reads, “before God, even our Father in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.” There is a coming to the earth, but there is also the coming to heaven. ... At the coming of Christ with all His saints to heaven, we will be “unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father.” [Walvoord, 47-48, 50-51]

In the next chapter of this letter Paul will have much more to say about “the coming of the Lord Jesus” for His saints.

Summary

In this chapter Paul completed the defense of his ministry against the false charges of his opponents. They were saying that he did not love and care for the Thessalonians, but the reality was that Paul cared so much that he was devastated by the separation and the lack of news about them. In this chapter he provided a glimpse into his emotional struggle, and he shared his immense joy at the good news of their positive response. At the end of this chapter Paul again expressed his deep desire to return to Thessalonica, that he kept praying night and day to be reunited with them (3:10-11). We know from the Book of Acts that he would eventually return to Thessalonica (Acts 20:1-4), but it would be five more years in the future before Paul would be able to see their faces again.

Encouragement in Areas of Concern

(1 Thessalonians 4:1-12)

As previously noted, Paul felt compelled to spend an extended amount of time sharing his thoughts and reactions to what occurred before, during, and after his visit to Thessalonica. He began his ascription of appreciation early in the first chapter, but he did not finish that section and finally pray for his readers until the end of the preceding chapter. Here in this chapter Paul will move on to the body of his letter which he will use to deal with several issues that Timothy reported to him. He will begin by addressing their sexual purity and then their responsibility to provide for their own needs.

1 Thess 4:1 – Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.

“**Finally**” is the Greek word *loipos* which means “as for what remains.” He simply stated that he will now continue with the rest of what he has to say to the Thessalonians. He again addressed them as “**brethren**” in Christ, so these remarks are given in the context of a family letter to his beloved spiritual children.

Paul began by using two different verbs: “**request**” (*erō-taō*, “ask or appeal”) and “**exhort**” (*parakaleō*, “encourage or urge”). He already mentioned that when he was with them he had been “exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children” (2:11). There Paul had said his exhortation was as a father, but here his exhortation is “**in the Lord Jesus**” – or as the following verse asserts, **by the authority of the Lord Jesus**. Paul’s appeal and exhortation was given with the full weight of authority because of his commission from the Lord as a chosen apostle of Christ. Here “Paul claimed to speak for Christ in this matter.” [Constable, 700]

Even in the short time he had been with the Thessalonians, Paul had shared many things about how they ought to live in order to please the Lord. He said here that they “**received**” his teaching, and he used the same Greek word (*paralambanō*) he had used in 2:13 where he said they had “**received** the word of God which you heard from us.” It literally means to take to one’s side, to bring close, or to accept for oneself. Paul had also spoken about how they were to “**walk** in a manner worthy of God” (2:12), and here he will repeat that they “**ought to walk and please God**.” As one commentator explains, “The starting point for Paul’s request is the instruction that the Thessalonians had already received from him when he was with them.” [Stallard, 63]

Paul’s request and exhortation here was that they should keep walking in faith (just as they are actually doing), but to an even greater extent. As one writer described it, “Though things are going well, there is room for improvement in the Christian experience. We are continually learning, maturing, growing in Christ. And even though Paul commends this church with so much that was good, still some were struggling.” [Couch, 103] The idea is that believers are to continue their spiritual growth because the Christian life is like a journey rather than a destination. There is always room for im-

provement and growth. Paul wanted them to “**excel**” (*perisseuō*), which is the same Greek word he used in 3:12 where he said, “may the Lord cause you to increase and **abound**.” He desired that they stay the course and continue making steady progress.

1 Thess 4:2 – For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

Again Paul called on the Thessalonians as eyewitnesses to something they “**know**” (*oida*) because they were directly involved. When he was with them he had given them various “**commandments**” (*paraggelia*) or precepts that they should strive to uphold. As one scholar has said, this word “is more at home in a military environment, being a usual word for the commands given by an officer to his men (cf. its use in Acts 5:28; 16:24). It is thus a word with a ring of authority.” [Morris, 116] In the context here, it refers to the teaching or instruction Paul had given them as to how they ought to behave in order to please God by living a life of holiness, which expresses itself in purity of thought, word, and deed (3:13).

“Many people regard the Christian life as a set of rules to be obeyed, or a list of prohibitions to avoid, but Paul regarded it as the outworking of a loving desire to please God who had chosen him.” [Constable, 700] Paul wanted everyone to understand that the “**Lord Jesus**” knows what is best for His children – that the way believers live will have specific consequences, some of which will bring blessing, while others will lead to sadness, disappointment, or despair. In giving these commandments, the Lord has only their best interests at heart, so believers should trust Him to guide them in the best possible ways.

1 Thess 4:3 – For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality;

Up to this point Paul's statements have been somewhat general, and he will continue in the first part of this verse by mentioning the believers' "**sanctification**" (*hagiasmos*). This is a term with important theological implications, but at its heart it identifies something that is set apart from common things for the exclusive use of God. Synonyms include consecration and dedication for holy service. Paul used the term here to reinforce the ideas he had just shared regarding a life that is "without blame in holiness before God" (3:13) and living in a way that will please God (4:1). He stated that their sanctification is God's "**will**" (*thelēma*), which here designates God's gracious design or purpose for the lives of believers. As one commentator says, "The will of God stated here in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 is the Lord's desire that the church be sanctified experientially and thus be strengthened by Him in order to avoid the terrible sin life of Thessalonica." [Couch, 105] This "**will of God, your sanctification**" is the same for believers today as it was for the Thessalonians.

Finally, at the end of this verse, Paul narrowed the focus of his exhortation to the specific area of concern that he wanted to address with the Thessalonians at that time. God's will for them was their sanctification in general, but the specific aspect of their holiness of life which he wanted to discuss involved their sexual behavior. There is something that they should "**abstain from**" (*apechō*), using a term that means to keep away or remain distant from something. They are to keep themselves from "**sexual immorality**," which is the single Greek word *porneia*. This was a broad term for any kind of illicit sexual intercourse, including adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lesbianism, or any other type of sexual behavior outside the revealed will of God. As Paul would later command the Corinthians regarding sexual immorality, "Flee immorality (*porneia*). Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body" (1 Cor 6:18).

One of the reasons Paul felt the need to address this issue was because of the prevalence of sexual sin in the culture of that time. As one scholar explained:

Fornication was one of the conspicuous forms of immorality in all areas of the pagan world. It was regarded as a matter of indifference and even defended as a necessity of nature, like eating and drinking. The well-known proneness of the pagan gods to sensuality had a degrading influence on public morals. Fornication received ritual sanction in some of the religious cults of the day. Adultery was a common subject of poetry, and all the arts were employed to make it a pleasing and seductive practice. The disclosures from Pompeii and Herculaneum bear painful testimony to the moral degradation that pervaded even the most civilized portion of the heathen world. [Hiebert, 180]

Just as in our culture today, there was a great deal of social pressure to conform to the lax moral standards of those around them, and that must have posed a formidable temptation for the members of the early church. Those believers (and we ourselves also) need to be reminded and even commanded to maintain sexual purity, especially in regard to the sanctity of marriage. Having just introduced the topic, Paul will continue to address it in the following verses.

1 Thess 4:4 – that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

Since impurity is incompatible with holiness, Paul explained that sexual purity requires “**each of you,**” each and every one, to learn how to “**possess his own vessel.**” This is a somewhat enigmatic phrase, but it seems best to understand it in the context of the need for self-control in regard to sexuality. The word “**possess**” (*ктаομαι*) can mean to gain control or win mastery over something. “**Vessel**” is the Greek word *skeuos* which can mean an implement, apparatus, or piece of equipment. It should probably be understood to refer to all aspects of human sexuality. Paul wanted the Thessalonians to gain mastery over themselves in order to behave

honorably and in ways that reflect their growing sanctification in the presence of God. One commentator expressed it this way:

We come to Christ in all our sin, and we receive cleansing by his atoning death. Then day by day we become more and more what God would have us to be. We increasingly experience the reality of being set apart for him. Sanctification is the name given to this process, as holiness is to the final state. When Paul speaks here of sanctification as God's will for the Thessalonian converts, he is reminding them of the implications of their having been purchased by the blood of Christ. Henceforth they belong to God and their lives must reflect this. But Paul is not here concerned with a general dissertation on the dedicated Christian life. He is dealing with the particular aspect of sexual purity. So he proceeds to the point "that you should avoid sexual immorality." His verb is a strong one, and it is reinforced by a preposition that emphasizes the separation. The Christian must have no truck with this evil thing. The noun strictly means fornication, but it is used of all forms of illicit sexual intercourse. These are incompatible with the sanctification required of a Christian. The whole question of sex relationships has to be viewed in the light of the fact that the body of the Christian belongs to God (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19-20). [Morris, 119]

1 Thess 4:5 – not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;

This verse described the negative consequences of sexual immorality. Paul used the word "**Gentiles**" (*ethnos*, "the nations") to encompass the entire pagan culture of that day which was permeated by lustful passion. "**Passion**" (*pathos*) is something that is strongly felt, in either a good or bad sense. Here it has a negative connotation because it is combined with the word "**lust**" (*epithumia*) which is an intensified form of a word that means a deep desire, uncontrollable craving, or passionate longing for what is forbidden. As one scholar explains, "The combination of the two terms indicates the surrender of an individual to his passions so that he is overwhelmed and carried away by them." [Hiebert, 183]

Paul described the general atmosphere of that society as being without a knowledge of the one true God; literally, they “**do not know God.**” The God of the Bible is characterized by absolute holiness, justice, and righteousness. This means that people who acknowledge Him and choose to revere Him will be held to a high standard of accountability in keeping with His holy character. “The Gentiles knew gods who were the personification of their own ambitions and lusts, but they did not know the true God, the God who is Himself holy and wills the sanctification of His followers.... This reference to Gentile ignorance of God is a pointed reminder to the readers.... With their new knowledge, to fall back into the immoral practices of paganism would be especially reprehensible.”

[Hiebert, 183-184] When a person comes to know God by trusting in Christ, he learns about the righteous character of God, and a believer’s standards for his own behavior change. He is also given a capability that he did not have before, the indwelling Holy Spirit, who can provide the desire and power to resist the pull of his old nature and to behave in ways that please God.

1 Thess 4:6 – and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.

This verse continues the discussion of the negative consequences of sexual immorality by looking at its impact on others. One commentator has said this “expression is apparently intentionally obscure to avoid a too precise statement of a distasteful subject.” [Hiebert, 185] Wrong behavior always results in negative consequences that affect not only the individual but also those closest to him. The word “**transgress**” (*hyperbainō*) literally means “to go beyond” or to overstep the proper limits, while the word “**defraud**” (*pleonekteō*) carries the idea of grasping something belonging to another or taking

advantage of someone for personal satisfaction. As one scholar explains, “It is generally held that Paul here narrows his remark to the sin of adultery, which obviously is a violation of the rights of another....Any illegitimate sexual relationship has in it the potential for social complications that cannot be calculated in advance.” [Hiebert, 186]

The reason for maintaining sexual purity is given at the end of this verse. It is **“because the Lord is the avenger in all these things.”** Violating God’s standards for sexual conduct will incur God’s punishment. One commentator writes, “Sexual immorality wrongs the partner in the forbidden act by involving him or her in behavior contrary to God’s will and therefore under His judgment. Two or more people practicing sex out of God’s will are calling God’s wrath down on themselves (Heb 13:4).” [Constable, 701-702] When Paul added, **“just as we also told you before,”** he made it clear that part of the instruction he had already given them consisted of information about the holy character of God, His righteous standards for the conduct of His children, and that He opposes and punishes unrighteousness. Paul had **“solemnly warned”** them that a holy God always judges sin, so his statement of this fact should not have been unfamiliar to them.

1 Thess 4:7 – For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.

Believers have a high calling from God, which Paul had taught them previously and has mentioned several times in this letter. He had already written that they are to “walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you” (2:12), that they should be “without blame in holiness before our God” (3:13), and that their sanctification is “the will of God” (4:3). At the end of the present verse he reiterated this fact when he said that God has called them to **“sanctification.”** This is the third time in this short passage that Paul used this same word

to contrast a believer's holiness with the sin of sexual immorality.

God's call to holiness logically means that He has not called them for the "**purpose of impurity.**" This phrase translates the single Greek word *akatharsia* which carries the idea of uncleanness and lustful, self-indulgent behavior. So the purpose of this verse is to show that sexual immorality is completely incompatible with the call of God on the life of every believer.

1 Thess 4:8 – So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

The word "**So**" (*toigaroun*) is a rare triple compound word that can be translated "therefore," indicating that Paul will now share a conclusion from his thoughts in the previous verses. "**He who rejects**" (literally, "lays aside") these arguments is not simply rejecting or dismissing a man-made moralistic rule based on secular thinking. The reasoning and speculations of human beings are always open to challenge. We should constantly evaluate what we are being told by following the example of the Bereans who were "examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). But here Paul declared that the precepts he shared were not simply the opinions of men. Paul had taught them the truths of God by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One commentator has said that "to despise this truth is to despise God. To treat lightly the commands of the apostle with regard to sexual purity is to attempt to treat lightly the One who cannot be disregarded." [Ryrie, 57] But some of Paul's readers may have believed that the powerful sexual urges they experienced were too much for them to deal with or control. So at the end of this verse Paul shared an important truth which all Christians need to believe as being true in their own lives: "**God gives His Holy Spirit to you.**" Believers are not alone in the effort to live in holiness, and they

are not required to fight the battle against the flesh in their own strength. Paul had reminded the Thessalonians that they already were experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit (1:5-6), and this indwelling power was always available to them in their struggle to maintain sexual purity. Believers may fail in their own strength, but by consciously acknowledging and relying on the power of the indwelling Spirit of God it is possible to overcome their own weakness and to experience success in the struggle.

1 Thess 4:9 – Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;

The word “**Now**” marks a transition into a new subject that the apostle Paul will address with the Thessalonians. This subject has to do with the “**love of the brethren**,” which is a translation of the single Greek word *philadelphia*, “brotherly kindness.” Paul said that he really did not need to “**write**” to them because God Himself, through the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit, had already “**taught**” them (*theo-didaktos*, “God-taught”) and empowered them to express this kind of love toward each other in the body of Christ. In this letter he had previously praised the Thessalonians for living in a way that expressed unconditional, self-sacrificing love for others (1:3; 3:6, 12), and he wanted them to “increase and abound” in this aspect of practical holiness.

1 Thess 4:10 – for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more,

In this verse Paul provided a wonderful testimony of encouragement and affirmation that the Thessalonians were already practicing this type of love within the family of God, and their hospitality was known across the entire province of Macedonia. Here he reiterated his desire for them, as he al-

ready said in 4:1, concerning how they ought to walk in order to please God, and that they should “**excel still more.**” There is always room for improvement and growth in the Christian life.

1 Thess 4:11 – and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you,

However, there was one aspect of their relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ which Paul wanted to discuss at the end of this chapter. He will remind them of his previous instruction or **command** (*paraggellō*, 4:2). Evidently he had already told them that they should “**make it their ambition**” (*philotimeomai*) to implement a specific practice. This Greek word means to strive earnestly or make it one’s aim to accomplish a goal. This word conveys the extent to which Paul wants them to strive in doing what he will say next.

The object of Paul’s command to the Thessalonians has several characteristics, and all of them are stated in the present tense which implies continuous or habitual action. Primarily he wanted them “**to lead a quiet life**,” which translates the single Greek word *hēsuchazō*, to live peaceably and tranquilly. Many years later Paul would use the same word to write to Timothy that leading a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity is essential for believers who want to please God (1 Tim 2:2). As part of this quiet life believers should make it their habit “**to attend to your own business**” (*prassein ta idia*), literally “do your own things.” Paul immediately clarified this by telling them “**to work with your own hands**” which refers to their responsibility to support themselves by earning their own living. Apparently there were some members of the church who were not following Paul’s command regarding this aspect of their “brotherly kindness.” He did not provide any details about this situation or what may have motivated this small group of believers to

behave this way. Paul did not want the focus to be on the reason for their disobedience, but he simply wanted them to follow his instructions and obey his command for diligence in providing for their own needs.

1 Thess 4:12 – so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

Paul specified two things that will result if the Thessalonians will lead a quiet life by working to provide for themselves. First, he described a person who attends to his own affairs as one who **“behaves”** (*peripateō*, literally “walks”) in a decent, honest, and **“proper”** manner. Supporting oneself by earning a living has always been considered the responsible thing to do, and that can enable believers to achieve an exemplary reputation even among those **“outside”** the family of faith. The implication is that behaving otherwise will damage a believer’s reputation with others around him.

Second, if the Thessalonians would “attend to their own business” and “work with their own hands” then they would **“not be in any need.”** The Greek word translated **“need”** (*chreia*) pictures a situation of necessity, lack, or want. The word **“any”** (*mēden*) means “not a single one.” Paul was saying that working in order to responsibly provide for one’s basic needs will result in a degree of healthy financial independence, which in turn will allow believers to bless those around them, rather than constantly relying on the generosity of others for their own needs.

If believers refuse to follow Paul’s command in this regard, how would it affect their reputation with outsiders? People who expect others to pay for their expenses are commonly viewed as an emotional and financial burden, causing their friends to feel used, taken advantage of, and manipulated. They are generally perceived as selfishly exploiting the generosity and resources of others without reciprocating or contributing their fair share. This reputation would be the

natural result of expecting others to take care of them, and it is exactly the opposite of what God desires for his children. Ultimately it damages the reputation of God in the eyes of the world.

Summary

God's will for all of His children is their sanctification – that they continually grow in spiritual maturity, which will reveal itself through their thoughts, words, and behavior. The Lord has not left us in the dark concerning His expectations for holy living, and with the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit each believer can make steady progress toward God's goal. From what Paul had said in previous chapters and again here, our sanctification is not purely a private matter, but it will be evident to others through the way we choose to live. One of the best advertisements for the truth and power of the gospel is the unexpected righteousness that can be seen in the life of God's children. But there is always room for growth, so believers can always strive to “excel still more” (4:10).

The Resurrection of Church-age Saints

(1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

In the last section Paul had reminded the Thessalonians of his instruction to lead a quiet, settled life (4:11), but ignorance or misunderstanding of doctrines of the faith can lead to distress, confusion, or heartache. Here Paul will begin to deal with a specific misunderstanding that was causing grief for some of them, and this issue involved what they had been taught concerning the future coming of the Lord for church-age believers.

There are few details regarding exactly what Paul had taught the Thessalonians on the subject of future events (eschatology), but it is clear that he had shared a great deal of information with them. We can be sure that Paul instructed them from the Old Testament about the certainty of resurrection (Job 14:14; 19:25-26; Ps 49:14-15; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2). The Jews commonly held that Abraham also expected God to raise the dead, especially in the context of his preparation to sacrifice Isaac to the Lord (compare Gen 22 and Heb 11:17-19). The truth of resurrection was well established.

Paul may have shared the sayings of Jesus which were commonly known and circulated before they were formally recorded in the Gospels. Jesus Himself had said, “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth” (John 5:28-29). At the events surrounding the death of Lazarus, his sister Mary understood from the Old Testament that he

would rise again in the resurrection, and Jesus responded by saying, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies” (John 11:24-25).

However, the historical fact of Christ’s physical resurrection prompted the need for additional revelation that God would give to the church-age apostles and prophets, especially concerning the stages or phases for the resurrection of the righteous. The Old Testament had taught that there would be a glorious coming of Messiah after the terrible period called the Day of the Lord (e.g., Joel 2), during which the wrath of God would be poured out on the unbelieving world. But the mystery of the church had not been revealed in the Old Testament (Eph 3:1-7), so prophetic truth regarding its future destiny awaited New Testament revelation. Just as the Jews had difficulty understanding the Old Testament teaching that there would be two comings of the Messiah – the first in humility, and the second in glory – New Testament saints also may have difficulty understanding that there would be two distinct future comings – the first to gather church-age believers to heaven, and the second to return with them to earth in glory.

Jesus Himself had promised His disciples that He would come again for them and would bring them to heaven where He has prepared a place for them (John 14:3). “The church would not remain here on earth, then, merely in some improved status, but will be taken away from the earth to heaven.” [Wood, 41] All of Paul’s previous teaching in Thessalonica had laid the foundation for their “steadfastness of hope” (1:3) because they were expecting Christ’s imminent return for them. Additional revelation for the church age taught that there would be a distinct coming of the Lord to rescue believers before the future time of wrath (5:9). They were eagerly awaiting “His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1:10). Paul himself was also looking forward to that

day when he would stand “in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming” (2:19). He had taught them that upon His appearing the Lord would establish them “without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus” (3:13). They were expecting Christ’s “rescue mission” on their behalf to occur at any moment.

But since the time when Paul had been with the Thessalonians, some of the believers there had died. This situation raised a concern which apparently Paul had not addressed before, and their confusion had caused them an inordinate amount of grief. They were uncertain about the status of their Christian loved ones who had died, which caused them to be disquieted and distressed. From their understanding of the Old Testament, believers who had died might be required to wait with previously deceased saints until the resurrection of the righteous at the beginning of the messianic kingdom (Dan 12:2). Would church-age believers who already died be overlooked at Christ’s imminent return to rescue believers from the wrath to come? Would the living believers have an advantage at the transition to heaven? Would there be a separation or distinction between the two groups for all eternity? All of this made the living believers wonder when they would be reunited with their deceased loved ones. In this section of his letter Paul will give the Thessalonians additional information so that they will be able to comfort and reassure each other.

1 Thess 4:13 – But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.

Paul began this new topic using the word “**But**” (*de*), which is the same Greek conjunction he often used to introduce his next thought (3:11; 4:9; 5:1, 12, 23), and here it would be appropriate to translate it “**Now**” as in the other places where it occurs. He also was in the habit of using vari-

ations of the phrase “**we do not want you to be uninformed**” when he was about to share some new information with his readers (e.g., Rom 11:25; 1 Cor 11:3; Col 2:1). One scholar adds, this is “a formula that he employs elsewhere and that usually seems to introduce something that is new to his readers.” [Morris, 135]

The subject of this entire section of the letter is “**those who are asleep**.” This was a common figure of speech which referred to people who have died. As one commentator explains, “This well-known euphemism for death did not originate with Christianity. It was a common metaphor among the Jews and was current even among pagans. The figure was apparently suggested by the stillness of the body and its apparent restfulness upon death.” [Hiebert, 202] This expression had been used even by Jesus to refer to death (John 11:11). So here Paul will begin to discuss the situation of church-age believers who have already died.

Evidently, in their confusion, the Thessalonians were grieving over the death of their loved ones as “**do the rest who have no hope**,” and Paul said here that this is something they should not be doing. One scholar provides several examples of the hopeless attitude of those in the culture of that day: “Greek and Roman philosophy agreed in holding out no hope for the future of the body....Four typical assertions are: ‘Of a man once dead there is no resurrection’ (Aeshylus); ‘Hopes are among the living, the dead are without hope’ (Theocritus); ‘Suns may set and rise again but we, when once our brief light goes down, must sleep an endless night’ (Catullus); ‘No one awakes and arises who has once been overtaken by the chilling end of life’ (Lucretius).” [Hiebert, 204] Statements such as these show what Paul meant when he said that the Thessalonians should not grieve with a similar feeling of hopelessness.

The implication is that Paul had already instructed them about the resurrection of living church-age saints, so here he was building on the facts he had taught when he was with them. He was now able to share additional information about the events that will occur at the future coming of the Lord to rescue church-age saints. The Thessalonians apparently assumed that Christians who had died would miss the reunion with Jesus when He returns to take living believers to heaven (John 14:3). In the following verses Paul will share information to correct this wrong assumption.

1 Thess 4:14 – For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

The word “**For**” (*gar*) introduced Paul’s reason why the Thessalonians should not behave as they were doing. He stated, “**if we believe that Jesus died and rose again.**” In the Greek language there are several types or classes of conditional sentences, and here Paul used what is known as a first class condition which is often called the “condition of fact.” First class conditional sentences mean that if something is true, and we assume that it is true, then the result will also be true. This type of conditional clause might be translated, “**Since** we believe that Jesus died and rose again,” because Christ’s resurrection was a verifiable fact of history.

Paul had taught the Thessalonians about the first coming of Christ, His substitutionary death on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead (Acts 17:3). Since they believe this fundamental doctrine concerning Christ’s resurrection, then they must also believe that “**God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.**” Paul was elevating the doctrine of the resurrection of church-age saints to a similar position of importance as that of Christ’s resurrection – since the first is true, the second is true as well. As one commentator says, “Since Christians know these events took

place, they can be equally certain, Paul said, that the souls of believers who have died will return with Christ when He comes for His living saints.” [Constable, 704] Paul’s message here was that, contrary to what the Thessalonians assumed, church-age believers who had already died would not miss the coming reunion with Jesus and their living loved ones. At His coming for the living, Jesus will bring with Him the souls of their previously deceased brethren.

1 Thess 4:15 – For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

Again the word “**For**” (*gar*) was used to introduce additional information on this topic. What Paul will write here is “**by the word of the Lord.**” He could not quote from the Old Testament to explain these truths because this “**coming of the Lord**” was part of God’s program of resurrection for the church which had not been previously revealed in the Scriptures. It is best to view Paul’s words as being a new revelation that was given through the apostles and prophets for the edification of the New Testament church (Eph 3:5). One commentator described it as “a revelation made to the writers directly, to Paul personally, or possibly to Silas (cf. Acts 15:32) to meet the special circumstances that had arisen.” [Hiebert, 209] The Thessalonians were to view this instruction as being given to them directly by the Lord Jesus Himself.

Paul will now share some previously unrevealed details about the sequence of events that will occur at this coming of Christ for His own. When he says “**we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord**” he was referring to those church-age believers who are still living at the moment of Jesus’ return for them. By using the first person plural (“we”) Paul included himself along with his readers. This clearly shows that all of them were eagerly expecting the im-

minent return of Jesus to take them to the place He has prepared in heaven. All believers should hold onto this same hope and expectation.

Regarding the comparison between living and dead believers, he stated that the living **“will not precede those who have fallen asleep.”** The Thessalonians had wrongly assumed that the living would take priority over their deceased brethren, but here Paul said that exactly the opposite will be true. To **“not precede”** means “to follow afterward.” He used the strongest words available in the Greek language (*ou mē*), a double negative, to communicate that there is absolutely no way the living believers would rise first. So here Paul explained the ordinal relationship: *deceased believers before living ones*. The implication, however, is that both categories of church-age saints will participate equally in this coming of the Lord for His children. As one commentator explained, “The revelation that the living will not have any advantage over the dead at the return of Christ makes any further feeling of sorrow for their dead wholly unjustified. The two classes of believers at the Lord’s return, those that are still alive and those that have died, will unitedly share the same destiny.” [Hiebert, 209]

1 Thess 4:16 – For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

In this verse Paul will provide additional details about the sequence of events, and then he will phrase his previous statement in a positive way by saying, **“the dead in Christ will rise first.”** As mentioned in the preceding verse, the dead are given priority over the living. Notice that this resurrection is exclusively for those **“in Christ,”** which identifies church-age individuals who have placed their trust in what Christ accomplished on the cross for their salvation. They

have become members of the body of Christ, the church, through the unique baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit for this age (1 Cor 12:13). This “limits the scope of the dead to those who experienced physical death while in spiritual union with Christ. Although physically dead, they are still ‘in Christ’; death did not sever them from Him.” [Hiebert, 214] This will be a special coming of the Lord specifically for those who have put their faith in Christ during the church age, which began with the special ministry of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). One commentator has said, “This dispensation is unique in that all believers of this age form the spiritual body of Christ. Though Christ’s sacrifice will be applied to all past generations, in God’s economic working of things the believers of this period have a different function and ministry. Contrary to the past, all who are saved now are baptized into one body, the body of Christ by one Spirit.” [Couch, 125]

Returning to the first part of the verse, Paul wrote that “**the Lord Himself will descend from heaven.**” He will not simply call out from heaven or send an angel to gather His children, but the Lord Himself will come from heaven because that is where He has resided since His ascension to the right hand of the Father (Mark 16:19; Rom 8:34; 1 Pet 3:22). The word “**descend**” (*katabainō*) literally means to step down. He will leave the throne room of God for a short time in order to raise His children for the purpose of bringing them back with Him to the place He has prepared for them in heaven.

Three signals are said to accompany this event. First, a “**shout**” (*keleuma*) which typically referred to a shout of command or a rousing cry. Next, a “**voice**” (*phōnē*) which usually indicated words spoken in a known language. In this case the voice is that of an archangel, which tells us that Jesus will not be alone. Finally, a “**trumpet**” (*salpigx*) of God will sound forth. This seems to refer to the same trumpet that Paul would later describe in a parallel passage written to the

Corinthian church when he said that “the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Cor 15:52). These three signals will accompany this resurrection event, which will involve both the dead and living believers of the church age.

At the end of this verse Paul said that the dead “**will rise**” from the earth, into and through the atmospheric heavens, to meet the Lord. This is the idea that Paul will explain more fully in the verse that follows.

1 Thess 4:17 – 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.

Immediately after the dead in Christ are resurrected, living believers will then be “**caught up**” (*harpazō*). This common Greek word means to snatch away, convey suddenly, or transport hastily, and it was used in different contexts to mean “whisked away” quickly and with force. When the Greek text was translated into Latin for the Roman church, the verb *rapturo* was used, which is the origin of the English word “rapture.” Therefore, this coming of the Lord for church-age saints is often called the doctrine of the Rapture.

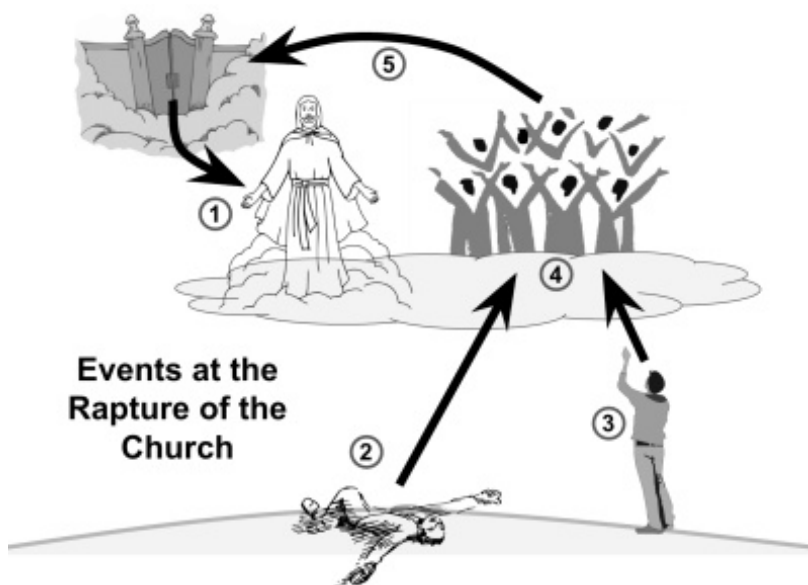
Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians does not provide all of the details we may want concerning the resurrection of church-age believers, but he would give additional information in his first epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15). One of the things that Paul confirmed in the Corinthians passage is that “we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Cor 15:51-52). Here in his letter to the Thessalonians he affirmed that at that same time, living believers will be caught up together with their deceased brethren.

The next phrase identifies the exact area to which Jesus descends at His coming. He will descend only as far as the atmospheric heavens, which is described as **“in the clouds”** and **“in the air.”** The Lord Jesus does not descend to the earth; rather, church-age saints ascend to meet Him above the earth. The locales and directions of travel are clearly specified in this passage. As one commentator explains, “Going up into the sky, into the air (*aera*), is an unmistakable description. Jesus is not coming down to establish His kingdom nor to judge men on earth. The Church saints are going upward. The reason seems to be clearly stated in 5:9 – to escape the coming wrath or Tribulation that falls upon the earth.” [Couch, 128] This coming of the Lord **for** His saints is described quite differently than His later coming **with** His saints after the Tribulation to establish His messianic kingdom on earth (Rev 19:14).

This verse concludes with the phrase **“we shall always be with the Lord.”** After this coming of the Lord for church-age believers, we will never again be separated from Him. Jesus’ promise of John 14:3 will be fulfilled: “I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” From that time forward we will be able to spend the rest of eternity in the presence of the Lord.

1 Thess 4:18 – Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Paul was writing to believers who were grieving the death of their saved loved ones, but his final exhortation to them was that they use these words from the Lord to provide practical comfort for one another. These are indeed comforting words which picture an incredible blessing for the church. Our blessed hope is to be in the presence of the Lord forever.



Summary

In this chapter Paul revealed new information about the coming of the Lord Jesus to gather church-age believers and return with them to His Father's house. The sequence of events is as follows:

1. Christ steps down from His Father's house to a place above the earth where He calls believers to Himself (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess 4:16)
2. The dead in Christ will rise first in their resurrection bodies (1 Thess 4:14-17)
3. Then living believers will be transformed and rise to meet Him in the clouds (1 Thess 4:17; 1 Cor 15:50-58)
4. Christ will receive and gather together all who are His (1 Thessalonians 4:17)
5. Christ will take them to the Father's house where they will be with the Lord forever (John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:17)

Distinctions between Rapture and Second Coming

Paul described two distinct phases in the coming of the Lord: 1) His coming above the earth **for** church-age saints at the Rapture, and 2) His coming to the earth **with** His saints to establish the messianic kingdom. These are different events, as the distinctions in the following chart show.

Rapture	Second Coming
Christ comes above the earth for His own	Christ comes to the earth with His own
Translated church-age believers go to heaven	Translated believers return to earth with Christ
Christians taken to the Father's house in heaven	Christians come with Christ to establish an earthly kingdom
No judgment on the earth	Christ judges the inhabitants of the earth
Could happen at any moment	Cannot occur until known pre-requisite events transpire
Time of joy and reward for believers only	Time of mourning and judgment for earthly unbelievers
Occurs before the "day of wrath" (Tribulation)	Occurs after the Tribulation
Satan remains active in the world	Satan bound for 1000 years
Only Christ's own will see Him	Every eye will see Him
The Tribulation will shortly begin	The Millennial Kingdom begins
Not predicted in the Old Testament	Clearly predicted in detail in the Old Testament

Rescue Before Wrath

(1 Thessalonians 5:1-11)

In the previous section Paul provided new details about the coming of the Lord for His children. He reassured the Thessalonian believers that church-age saints, both living and dead, will be caught up to meet the Lord above the earth so as to be with Him forever. While Paul had told them that Jesus rescues us from the wrath to come, he had not shared many details about the timing of the Rapture of the church (4:16-17) except that the rescue precedes the wrath (1:10). But here in the first part of this chapter Paul will give a brief description of the Day of the Lord before he affirms that believers are not destined to experience this future judgment.

1 Thess 5:1 – Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you.

“**Now**” (*de*) introduces the next topic that Paul wanted to address in his letter to the Thessalonians. This paragraph continues until verse twelve where Paul will again indicate a new topic using “**Now**” (*de*). Paul started by addressing the Thessalonians as beloved “**brethren**,” just as he had done throughout this letter. The subject he wanted to discuss involved “**the times and the epochs**.” This somewhat enigmatic phrase may seem familiar because it is among the final words of Jesus before His ascension. His disciples had asked Him whether He was going to bring in the messianic kingdom for Israel at that time, and Jesus responded by saying, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father

has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7). Essentially Christ was saying, “It is not yet time for My coming in judgment and power to establish the kingdom.” Paul may have repeated these words of Jesus here because the subject he desired to address in this section involved the same end time events.

There are two Greek words (*chronos* and *kairos*) that can be translated by the single English word “**time**.” Sometimes they seem to be used as synonyms in the New Testament, but there are subtle distinctions between them. One scholar explained:

Our idea of time is very nearly identical with that conveyed by the former of the two words. Indeed, we derive our word “chronology” from it. It denotes time simply as sequence....This second word, then, can have a reference to the kinds of events that are taking place rather than simply to the duration that is being measured. The combination of the two is perhaps a way of bringing before the mind both the duration of time that must elapse before the coming of the Lord and the nature of the events that will characterize the end time. [Morris, 148-149]

In the final part of this verse Paul stated that there was no need for “**anything to be written**” to the Thessalonians on this subject, and in the following verse he will explain why.

1 Thess 5:2 – For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.

Here Paul shared the reason he did not need to write about the subject of Christ’s future coming in judgment on a sinful world. It was because the Thessalonians already knew “**full well**” (*akribōs*), which means that their knowledge was accurate, precise, and thorough. As one writer explained, “Their information did not need correction or supplementation....In dealing with prophetic subjects the missionaries had been accurate teachers. It is an essential characteristic for all biblical teaching. The writers’ statement involves a paradox: ‘You know accurately that nothing accurate as to the precise

date for the day of the Lord can be known.” [Hiebert, 226] The Thessalonians had been taught that even though they could not know the exact time of its onset, the coming judgment was certain and inescapable.

In the previous verse Paul had identified his subject as “the times and the epochs,” but in this verse he referred to it as the **“day of the Lord.”** Later in this section he will characterize it as the time of God’s wrath (5:9). In many places the Old Testament prophesied the terrible period of future judgment called the Day of the Lord (e.g., Joel 2:1-2; Zeph 1:14-18). During that time the wrath of God, which is the just punishment for sin, would be poured out on the ungodly world. For example, Isaiah 13:9-11 says, “Behold, the day of the LORD is coming, cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation; and He will exterminate its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light. Thus I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud and abase the haughtiness of the ruthless.”

There are also several places in the New Testament where this phrase identifies the coming period of judgment (e.g., 2 Thess 2:2; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Pet 3:10). One commentator explained, “Clearly Paul uses the term ‘the day of the Lord’ with its Old Testament connotation of the Lord coming in judgment to establish His kingdom. It is thus to be distinguished from His coming for His saints, the rapture, as described in the preceding paragraph. As a prophetic period, the Day of the Lord is inaugurated with the rapture of the church as described in 4:13-18, covers the time of the Great Tribulation, and involves His return to earth and the establishment of His messianic reign. In this passage Paul is dealing only with the judgment aspect of that day.” [Hiebert, 227] By using the phrase “day of the Lord,” Paul focused attention on the wrath of God

that will be poured out during that period of judgment.

At the end of this verse Paul added an illustration which Jesus Himself had used to describe the onset of this time of divine intervention in human history. He said that it will come **“just like a thief in the night”** (cf. Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39). This analogy communicates more than the fact that the exact time of its coming is unknown, but also that it will take those who are unprepared by surprise. The picture is of a homeowner asleep in his bed at night, so that he is oblivious to the harmful events that are beginning to happen. This represents the condition of the unbelieving, Christ-rejecting world at the time when the Day of the Lord begins. Paul will mention the picture of a thief again in 5:4, where he will say that this illustration was never intended to apply to believers who belong to Christ.

1 Thess 5:3 – 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.

Here Paul continued to describe the attitude of the unbelieving, Christ-rejecting world at the commencement of the Day of the Lord. Notice that **“they are saying”** (third person plural) which is in direct contrast to the second person plural (“you”) that refers to the Thessalonian believers. He wrote that they will be saying **“Peace and safety”** when the events of the Day of the Lord begin. This does not mean that peaceful and secure conditions will actually prevail during that time, but that they will be expressing their wishful notion of such conditions. They are pictured as being ignorant, unaware, or unconcerned regarding the Lord’s impending judgment. As one scholar says, “The vast masses of mankind will be preoccupied with the things of this world and will show no interest in preparing for the Lord’s coming. This fact is clearly illustrated by the Lord in His comparison of the days before

His return to the days of Noah (Matt 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27) and of Lot (Luke 17:28-30).” [Hiebert, 228] They will express an arrogant self-sufficiency and a false sense of security because they have willfully chosen to ignore God’s warnings.

Paul added that “**destruction will come upon them suddenly**” once the events of the Day of the Lord begin. “**Suddenly**” indicates that their experience of those destructive events will take them by surprise because they are not expecting them. The direct contrast is clear between the opposing concepts of “**peace and safety**” versus “**destruction**” (*olethros*), a Greek word which does not mean annihilation, but a hopelessness and ruin that comes with the loss of everything which gives meaning to life.

Here Paul switched his metaphor again. He will now compare the beginning of the Day of the Lord to the onset of childbirth: “**like labor pains upon a woman with child.**” The single point of comparison intended by this figure of speech is that once a pregnant woman’s water breaks, the birth will inevitably take place in short order – it is a painful time that is inescapable and unavoidable. To understand this analogy correctly, the many good and beneficial aspects of pregnancy and childbirth should be set aside. For example, in contrast to the sleeping homeowner in the previous illustration, a pregnant woman is well aware of her condition, but that is not the intended point of comparison in this new figure. The way Paul used this illustration, he focused solely on the inevitability of the Lord’s wrath, whether people are aware of it at the time or not. In Paul’s words at the end of this verse, “**they will not escape**” the Day of the Lord.

In the first three verses of this chapter Paul provided a brief description of the coming wrath during the Day of the Lord. His purpose was to show that this inevitable time of judgment and destruction will not be for church-age saints. It is the coming wrath from which believers will be rescued through the Rapture of the church before the beginning of the

Day of the Lord.

1 Thess 5:4 – But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief;

In this verse Paul will contrast the attitudes and circumstances of the unbelieving world with those of believers in the church. Notice that he has finished describing unbelievers and will now begin speaking to church-age saints in the rest of this section. Here again Paul switched his metaphor. Apparently, as he was using the word “day” to designate the coming Day of the Lord, Paul also thought of the contrast between “**day**” and “**night**” – “**light**” and “**darkness**.” He will introduce this new analogy here, and then he will elaborate on it in his exhortation to believers in the verses that follow.

He declared that believers “**are not in darkness**,” which sets up the terms of the illustration, pairing believers with light and unbelievers with darkness. Jesus Himself used this metaphor many times. For example, “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:19-21). Later Paul would use this analogy in writing to the Corinthian believers: “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Cor 6:14)

After introducing his new metaphor, Paul briefly returned to his illustration of the “thief in the night” and used “day” to identify the Day of the Lord. He stated that, for believers, that day will not “**overtake you like a thief**.” This expression relates to what he said in 5:2 about the coming day of wrath.

Here Paul clearly declared that ***church-age believers are not destined to experience the Day of the Lord.*** That period of future judgment and wrath is appointed for the unbelieving world living in darkness. Since he has clearly established this fact, he will next take the opportunity to use this “day / night” metaphor to encourage and exhort the Thessalonian believers toward further spiritual growth as they await the Lord’s coming to rescue them from the future time of wrath.

1 Thess 5:5 – for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness;

Paul positively affirmed that believers are “**all sons of light and sons of day**,” then he restated this truth negatively: “**We are not of night nor of darkness.**”

It indicates their contrast to the unbelieving world as to the sphere of their life. Unbelievers have their existence in the realm of “darkness,” a common religious metaphor for sin and evil. Darkness is emblematic of the condition of the moral and spiritual estrangement and ignorance of the unredeemed. It has penetrated their hearts and minds, blinding them to spiritual realities and making them oblivious to impending judgment. Spiritual darkness is the habitual sphere in which the man of the world lives and moves. The missionaries record the happy fact that their readers as believers “are not in darkness.” They have been spiritually enlightened, have passed out of the darkness of ignorance and unbelief. They have been delivered out of the power of darkness and transplanted into the kingdom of the Son of God’s love (Col 1:13). [Hiebert, 230-231]

Church-age saints are pictured as being “sons of light and sons of day” rather than groping in spiritual darkness like those who do not know God. Now that Paul has established the terms of his metaphor, in the following verses he will share additional instruction using this word picture.

1 Thess 5:6 – so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.

The first words, “**so then**,” introduce the admonition Paul wanted to present using this illustration. Notice that he is still addressing believers, which is clear from his use of the first person plural (“**us**”). Sleep is one of the natural activities that typically occurs at night, and Paul used a different word than in 4:13-15, where he described deceased saints as “asleep” (*koimaō*). Here when Paul used the word “**sleep**” (*katheudō*) he was not thinking of its positive, normal, healthy aspects. Instead Paul focused on the fact that a person is unconscious while asleep. When a person is unconscious he is not aware of what is happening around him and is unable to sensibly react to his situation.

Using this new metaphor Paul will make the point that a sleeping person is analogous to a believer who is insensible or indifferent to spiritual realities. Believers should not live in a way that is characterized by lack of awareness or concern for spiritual things. One scholar explains that believers who are asleep in this sense become “morally inert and expose themselves to the dangers resulting from sin. The present tense of the verb stresses that as sons of day they must constantly keep themselves from falling into such a condition.” [Hiebert, 234] Believers in such a state are behaving more like people of the night than “sons of the day.”

At the end of this verse Paul gave the positive statement of this truth when he said, “**let us be alert**” (*grēgoreuō*), which signifies being watchful, attentive, vigilant, and awake. This represents the opposite of drowsiness, and it requires spiritual wakefulness. Paul exhorted the Thessalonian believers to guard against spiritual slumber. As the final word he added that they must also be “**sober**” (*nēphō*), which means to avoid intoxication. In the New Testament this word was used only in its figurative sense of sober-mindedness. This broadens the metaphor to show that slumber is not the only thing that can dull the spiritual senses, metaphorically speaking.

1 Thess 5:7 – For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night.

This verse presented the straightforward, well-known facts that people do their “**sleeping at night**,” and that revelers “**get drunk at night**.” This may seem a little out of place in a section that is obviously metaphorical. However, we should remember that Paul began this illustration by contrasting “day” and “night” – “light” and “darkness.” So here he implied that believers who allow themselves to become spiritually dull, indifferent, or impaired are exhibiting the characteristics of those in darkness rather than those who desire to live in the light. One commentator stated, “The argument is that sleep is natural in the night, so indifference to God is the natural characteristic of the unregenerate man who is spiritually in the night. But the believer no longer belongs to the realm of night.” [Hiebert, 235] In the previous verse Paul had exhorted the Thessalonians to behave in exactly the opposite way – believers must be mentally and spiritually awake and sober – and he will emphasize that point again in the following verse.

1 Thess 5:8 – 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.

Here Paul repeated himself in order to pick up the train of thought from 5:6. Since believers belong to the realm of light as “sons of day,” they must engage in activities that are appropriate for daylight hours, including sober-mindedness and spiritual alertness. Daytime is not considered the proper time for drowsiness and drunkenness. Since they are of the day, believers must live in a way that promotes service to others, as well as personal spiritual growth, while they are expectantly watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord as their Rescuer from wrath. Being spiritually dull would blunt their effectiveness during their sojourn here, and that is what

Paul is urging them to avoid.

In this verse Paul added a crucial element that will help believers to live in the way God desires. He employed a military analogy to describe the protection that is available to believers as they attempt to fulfill their calling to live in the light. In the world of Paul's day, Roman military forces were ever-present. It would be a common sight to observe armed soldiers marching from place to place or engaged in various activities across all parts of the empire. The typical Roman soldier would wear several pieces of armor in order to protect the vulnerable parts of his body. Paul will later write to the Ephesian believers regarding the "full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Eph 6:11). But here in 5:8 Paul mentioned only two of the most important pieces of equipment: the breastplate and the helmet.

The "**breastplate**" represents the Thessalonians' virtues of "**faith and love**," which he had continually praised throughout this letter (1:3, 8; 3:2, 5-7, 12; 4:9). Their faith or complete trust in God, which was demonstrated through their self-sacrificing love for others, will function to protect the spiritual vital organs, such as the heart (2:4; 3:13). The "**helmet**" represents their "**hope of salvation**," which Paul had also praised in 1:3 as their "steadfastness of hope." This speaks of their unwavering expectation of the imminent coming of the Lord to rescue them from the period of future wrath. Relying on these pieces of spiritual armor – these qualities or characteristics of faithful Christian living – will help believers to maintain spiritual alertness and sober-mindedness, even while enduring the normal trials and afflictions of life in a fallen world.

1 Thess 5:9 – For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

This verse restates and affirms the truth that Paul had shared in several ways in this letter (1:10; 4:16-17). Here he clearly declared that **“God has not destined us for wrath.”** The initial **“For”** is not the Greek word that was previously translated “for” (*gar*). This is the Greek word *hoti* that is often translated “so that, since, or because.” The word **“destined”** (*tithēmi*) can mean to put in place, appoint, ordain, or plan. The Greek preposition translated **“for”** wrath” is actually *eis* which means “in or into” wrath. This tells us that, as part of God’s eternal plan for church-age saints, He keeps them from having any part in the future period of judgment and **“wrath”** (*orgē*) that is coming upon the unbelieving world. As one scholar explains, “God wills not our destruction but our salvation. He has no intention that we should become the subjects of His wrath....The negative assertion seems clearly to assure that believers will not have part in the coming Great Tribulation, when God’s wrath falls upon a Christ-rejecting world (Rev 6:15-17; 14:10; 19:15). They are looking forward not to the coming of that day when God will display His wrath in divine judgment but to the coming of the Lord Himself who will deliver them from the very presence of sin.”

[Hiebert, 238]

Paul then stated this truth in a positive way: *Church-age believers who have placed their trust in Christ for **salvation from sin** are also destined to obtain **salvation from wrath**. “Obtaining”* (*peripoiēsis*) has the thought of setting aside for safekeeping or preservation. The Greek word for **“salvation”** (*sōtēria*) carries the idea of deliverance or rescue, which in this context means deliverance from future wrath. The entire prospect of rescuing from wrath and preserving for safekeeping is accomplished for believers **“through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** All of this is due completely to the purpose and work of God through Jesus Christ.

1 Thess 5:10 – who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.

In the first part of this verse, Paul explained how our Lord Jesus Christ accomplished this. Jesus “**died for us**” in order to purchase our justification through His death in our place. By using this brief phrase, Paul included not only Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross, but His resurrection which conquered death itself, and His ascension to the right hand of the Father in glory. For every believer, the sentence of God’s judgment was taken by Jesus, and the wrath of God was satisfied through what Christ accomplished. Everyone who believes these facts and puts their trust solely in what He has done for them is saved completely. Jesus Himself described the purpose of His first coming in humility: “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged” (John 3:17-18). Notice that in the context of 5:9-10, Christ’s role as our **Rescuer** from wrath is directly tied to what He accomplished as our **Redeemer** on the cross. His atoning death in our place forms the basis for His rescue of believers from God’s wrath.

Paul then said that these benefits are available for every church-age believer, regardless of their previous or subsequent behavior. He pictures this in terms of his earlier metaphor (5:6-8) when he says “**whether we are awake or asleep.**” Some Christians are more spiritually awake and alert than others – some are more sober-minded and productive than others – but regardless of their condition, if they have put their trust in Christ then Paul says they “**will live together with Him**” at His coming to gather them to Himself (1:10; 4:16-17).

1 Thess 5:11 – Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

Here at the end of this section Paul would tell the Thessalonian believers to “**encourage**” (*parakaleō*) one another with these truths. He used the same word here as he did at the end of the last section where he told them to “comfort” one another. Once believers understand what Paul has shared with them, they should pass on that knowledge to others within the body of Christ who are struggling with the same concerns. It is tremendously reassuring to know that God has not destined church-age saints for wrath but for rescue.

Not only are believers to encourage one another but they are to “**build up**” one another, which is the Greek word *oikodomeō* that expresses the concept of edification. One of the primary functions of the leadership of the local church is the edification of believers (Eph 4:11-16). This can take various forms, involving education, instruction, teaching, schooling, tutoring, coaching, or training. Regarding these great truths of the Rapture prior to the Day of the Lord, one commentator says, “This new instruction needed constant repetition and reemphasis. It was to be added to the body of truth they had already received, and as they were encouraging each other in their meetings and in private conversations about other revealed truth they were to include this great truth as well.” [Constable, 707] Paul would later tell the elders of the Ephesian church, “I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Act 20:32). Edification happens as the Word of God is carefully taught to believers within the body of Christ.

Finally, Paul again affirmed that the Thessalonian believers were already doing many of the things he had discussed (cf. 4:1, 10). Paul’s message has been peppered with statements of affirmation which demonstrated his love and concern for their well-being and their continued spiritual growth.

Summary

In the first part of this chapter Paul briefly described the future time of judgment called the Day of the Lord. He focused on the time of wrath when God will pour out judgment on the ungodly during the Great Tribulation. But church-age believers are not destined to experience that time of future judgment and wrath – it is appointed for the unbelieving world who are living in darkness. Church-age saints should be awake and alert to the imminent coming of the Lord, which is their “hope of salvation” and deliverance from the time of wrath. Paul clearly presents the differences between believers and the unbelieving world.

Believers	Unbelieving Wicked
Informed of the “times and epochs” of the Second Coming of Christ in judgment.	Deliberately ignorant of the “times and epochs” of the Second Coming of Christ.
Not laden with judgment. The Lord Jesus Christ took upon Himself the believers’ judgment.	Birth pains will soon begin and judgment will be inescapable.
Not in the realm of darkness or night, and therefore not eligible for the Day of the Lord.	Belong to the realm of darkness or night, and therefore destined for the Day of the Lord.
Not destined to experience the wrath of God at the future Day of the Lord.	Appointed for God’s wrath during the Day of the Lord.

Instructions for Deepening Spiritual Growth

(1 Thessalonians 5:12-28)

At the end of the last section Paul told the Thessalonians to “encourage one another and build up one another” (5:11). The edification of believers within the body of Christ is one of the major responsibilities of the appointed elders of the local church. So Paul will begin this final section of his letter by encouraging the brethren to respect and appreciate the leaders who have been given responsibility for the health and welfare of their local church.

1 Thess 5:12 – 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,

Paul phrased his initial directive in the form of a “**re-quest**” (*erōtaō*), using the normal Greek word for asking something of someone. Even though Paul addressed them as “**brethren**” and does not assert his apostolic authority here, the Thessalonians should act upon his request out of respect for their spiritual father in the Lord. He asked that they would “**appreciate**” (literally, “know”) the appointed leaders of their church. This term implies regarding them favorably and showing them the respect that is due their position. One scholar suggested a reason why Paul may have had to address this issue with the Thessalonians:

All the members of this church were new Christians, and most of them had been converted about the same time. Some, however, had become officers in the church. It was difficult for a few to take orders from those whom they had known all their lives and who had been saved about the same time. While it is true that in the church all have equal spiritual privileges and blessings, it is not true that all have equal office, for there are differences of gifts, and among these gifts is the gift of government (1 Cor 12:28). If there are those who govern there are those who are governed. [Ryrie, 75]

Paul identified the church leaders in three ways. First, they are **“those who diligently labor among you.”** To **“diligently labor”** (*kopiaō*) is a form of the Greek word used in 1:3 when he praised their “labor of love.” As it did there, here it means intense labor accompanied by struggle, fatigue, and weariness. Their appointed leaders were laboring among them to the point of weariness, which illustrates the personal cost of church leadership.

Second, the leaders **“have charge over you in the Lord.”** The phrase **“have charge over”** is from the single Greek word *proistēmi* which carries the idea of being commissioned with authority and having the responsibility of governing, leading, or managing the affairs of the church. This is indeed a weighty responsibility because they were to accomplish their task **“in the Lord.”** A leader in the church is not given authority for the purpose of “lording it over those allotted to your charge,” but that they should be “examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:1-3). In the case of the church in Thessalonica, their leaders had been appointed after much prayerful consideration by the apostle Paul and his missionary team.

Third, they **“give you instruction.”** One of the primary responsibilities of a church leader is to ensure that edification and instruction are provided in order to build up every believer in the body of Christ. Instead of using the common word for teaching (*didaskō*), Paul used the verb *noutheteō* which is literally “to place into the mind.” Its normal meaning

is to admonish, warn, or gently reprove. One commentator said, “It is a part of the duty of a minister to put his people in mind of the truth; to warn them of danger; to exhort them to perform their duty; to admonish them if they go astray.”

[Barnes, 57] In addition to appreciating their leaders, Paul will go on to request something even more important from them.

1 Thess 5:13 – and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.

Here Paul continued his request concerning their leaders who were laboring among them. Not only did Paul ask that the Thessalonians “regard them with favor” (5:12), but in this verse he will ask that they “**esteem them very highly**.” The Greek word used for “**esteem**” (*hēgeomai*) presents an interesting play on words. It is often used to identify someone as a leader, governor, or chief, literally someone who “leads the way.” A secondary meaning is to give something a leading place in your thoughts or affections. So here Paul was saying that believers should give their leaders a leading place in their esteem. He qualified this by telling them the extent to which they are to esteem their leaders. The phrase “**very highly**” is from the single Greek word *huperekperissōs* which is an intensified form of *perissōs*, that by itself means “exceedingly beyond measure.” Paul had used a form of this word earlier when he admonished the Thessalonians to “abound in love” (3:12) and to “excel still more” in living to please God (4:1). Here we might say that their esteem for their leaders should “abundantly abound exceedingly” in “**love**” (*agapē*), which expresses their deep regard for them.

Their esteem should be not only for what is due their position, but also because of their “**work**” (*ergon*), which is a general term for any task that someone undertakes. As one commentator eloquently explained, “It is a work whose only tendency, when rightly performed, is to do good. It injures no

man, but contributes to the happiness of all. It promotes intelligence, industry, order, neatness, economy, temperance, chastity, charity, and kindness in this world, and leads to eternal blessedness in the world to come. A man who sincerely devotes himself to such a work has a claim on the kind regards of his fellow-men.” [Barnes, 57]

At the end of this verse Paul included an imperative or command that they “**live in peace with one another.**” The phrase “**live in peace**” is from the single Greek word *eirēneuō*, which means to nurture or foster peace, unity, and harmony among the brethren. When Paul stated this command here, he did not add (as he had so often) “just as you are already doing” (see 4:1; 5:11). Evidently he was concerned that there was a way in which the Thessalonians were not living in complete harmony with one another, especially in regard to their attitude toward the appointed leaders of the church. Paul had already mentioned that they were mutually building up one another (5:11), but apparently there was evidence of an independent spirit which caused them to fall short of Paul’s high standard for respecting the leaders who had been given responsibility for the church in Thessalonica. Paul will provide an additional hint regarding this issue in the following verse.

1 Thess 5:14 – We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

Here again he addressed the Thessalonians as his beloved “**brethren**” when he said, “**we urge you**” (*parakaleō*). Paul is urging and exhorting them to “**admonish**” (*noutheteō*), caution, or warn a particular group of individuals in the church. He did not provide many details here, but he described this small group of people as “**unruly.**” This Greek word, *ataktos*, is a military term that literally means “out of order or rank.” It was used to describe someone who was in-

subordinate or who willfully strayed from an authorized order or structure. As one commentator explains, “Many a church is like an army where half the soldiers are out of the line; where there is entire insubordination in the ranks, and where not half of them could be depended on for efficient service in a campaign.” [Barnes, 58]

Paul’s instruction here appears at the head of a list of four things that the brethren were to do, so it might be easily overlooked. Paul did not provide additional explanation for the content of their warning to this group, so it seems best to connect it to what he said in the previous verse about respecting their appointed leaders and giving priority to them which is due by virtue of their position. Apparently a small group of individuals was not doing this and could rightly be called insubordinate or out from under proper authority. Although a direct link is not made here in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, it is possible that this errant behavior may be connected to Paul’s earlier admonition that they attend to their own business and work to support themselves (4:11-12). This is an issue that Paul will elaborate on in his second letter to the Thessalonians.

As Paul continued his list of exhortations he told them to “**encourage**” (*paramutheomai*) the fainthearted, using a word that means to come alongside with gentle words of consolation, comfort, or cheer. The “**fainthearted**” are literally those of “little spirit,” which may refer to believers who have come to the point of losing heart, becoming despondent, or giving up, possibly due to persecution, the loss of loved ones, or other distressing circumstances they were facing in Thessalonica.

Next, Paul exhorted them to “**help the weak**.” To “help” literally means to cling to or hold firmly and the “**weak**” (*asthenēs*) are those who have no strength, either physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, or spiritually. Paul had already addressed one area of potential moral weakness when

he urged them to abstain from sexual immorality (4:3-8), and he had given words of comfort to ease the emotional frailty of those grieving the loss of their believing loved ones (4:13-18). The weak are still brothers and sisters for whom Christ died and for whom He will return as Rescuer, so the church should stand by them and support them until His coming.

At the end of this verse Paul told them to **“be patient with everyone,”** and the word for **“patient”** (*makrothumeō*) literally means to be long-passioned. It includes the ideas of forbearance, long-suffering, and being slow to anger or avenge. It carries the thought of bearing with or enduring offenses and injuries from others. All of this is quite difficult to do in one’s own strength, but God has provided His indwelling Holy Spirit to empower believers. And He has given the assurance that this will be required for a relatively short time until Christ delivers His children from these things at His coming to transform them in holiness. It may extend across a lifetime from our perspective, but what is that in light of eternity to come?

1 Thess 5:15 – See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.

The opening word which is emphasized in the original sentence is *horaō*, meaning “see, watch out, or see to it.” Adding to the idea from the previous verse of being long-suffering and slow to avenge, here Paul tells believers that they should be on their guard so as not to **“repay another with evil for evil.”** The simple truth is that it is possible for believers within the body of Christ to offend one another. However, retaliation is forbidden. Later, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul described a situation where some church saints were actually taking each other to court in order to gain a legal advantage or protection. One of his admonitions to them was, “Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that

you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?” (1 Cor 6:7) A believer who seeks revenge or repays evil for evil is simply accruing judgment to his own account. Acts of retaliation within the body of Christ only add to the works for which believers will lose any reward they would otherwise have received at the Judgment Seat of Christ. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10). Ultimately, retaliation hurts the one who engages in it.

Next Paul sets up a strong contrast (“**but**,” *alla*) to share his statement in positive terms: “**always seek after that which is good.**” To “**seek after**” (*diōkō*) means to actively pursue a goal. The word “**good**” (*agathos*) is simply the contrasting term for “bad” (*kakos*) which was translated “**evil**” in the first part of the verse. The goal of every believer should be to diligently seek whatever will bring about the good of others, both to those within the body of Christ as well as to those outside the family of God. Seeking the good of everyone also reaffirms Paul’s earlier command to be self-supporting so they will “behave properly toward outsiders” (4:12).

1 Thess 5:16 – Rejoice always;

In this short verse Paul admonished the believers to “**re-joyce**” (*chairō*) which means to be glad, be joyful or full of joy. This kind of joy is not a feeling, but a decision. Here Paul is giving an imperative or command, but you cannot command a person to feel joyful. “He is not writing about a joy that Christians produce by their own efforts. It is natural for people to be happy when things go well with them. But it is not this natural joy, dependent on circumstances, that is the special characteristic of Christians. It is the joy that comes from being in Christ.” [Morris, 172]

Regardless of his circumstances, a Christian can rejoice that he has a Savior who has reconciled him to God. One commentator has eloquently described the believers' joy:

When we think of our sins, we may now rejoice that there is one who can deliver us from them; when we think of the worth of the soul, we may rejoice that there is one who can save it from death; when we think of our danger, we can rejoice that there is one who can rescue us from all peril, and bring us to a world where we shall be for ever safe....The principal joy of the true Christian should be in the Lord. He should find his happiness not in riches, or gaiety, or vanity, or ambition, or books, or in the world in any form, but in communion with the Lord Jesus, and in the hope of eternal life through him. In his friendship, and in his service, should be the highest of our joys, and in these we may always be happy. It is the privilege, therefore, of a Christian to rejoice. He has more sources of joy than any other man - sources which do not fail when all others fail. [Barnes, *Philippians*, 189-190]

Paul admonished them to make this deliberate joy a part of their attitude “**always**” (*pantote*), which literally means “every when” or at all times. It requires mental discipline to obey a command like this, especially in the face of difficult experiences in life. But with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit, believers can do their best to live in a state of joy that is not conditioned on outward circumstances. As one scholar says, “Their own experience had already taught them the reality of Christian joy amid suffering for their faith (1:6; 2:14). They well knew that this was no natural joy but rather the product of the indwelling Holy Spirit. It was the exhibition of this joy amid suffering that was one of the distinctive features of the early Christian church, amazing the heathen world, and drawing many to Christ.” [Hiebert, 258]

1 Thess 5:17 – pray without ceasing;

Next, Paul commanded them to “**pray**” (*proseuchomai*), using the common word for laying one's concerns, wishes, and desires before God. When Paul said “**without ceasing**”

(*adialeiptōs*) it can mean uninterruptedly or by unvarying custom (cf. 1:3). In either case, believers can make it their practice to be in communication and communion with God, whether formally or informally, throughout their day. As one commentator has said, “The Thessalonian believers (like all others) were dependent on God for everything. Continuing prayer is the continuing expression of this dependence.... Prayer is not to be thought of only as offering petitions in set words. Prayer is fellowship with God. Prayer is the realization of the presence of our Father.” [Morris, 173] This type of constant communion with God is one of the things that allows believers to rejoice always, no matter the circumstances.

1 Thess 5:18 – in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

Paul added his command that “in everything” they should “**give thanks**” (*eucharisteō*), which was the common word for expressing gratitude (1:2; 2:13). The preposition “**in**” (*en*) shows that Paul wanted believers to respond with thanksgiving in all situations, whether they perceive them to be good or bad at the time. It is the duty of a Christian to cultivate an attitude of gratitude regardless of outward circumstances. One commentator has said, “Is a man ever made to drink the cup of affliction when no drop of mercy is intermingled? Is he ever visited with calamity which does not in some way contemplate his own temporal or eternal good! Could we see all, we should see that we are never placed in circumstances in which there is not much for which we should thank God. And when, in his dealings, a cloud seems to cover his face, let us remember the good things without number which we have received.” [Barnes, 59]

At the end of this verse Paul declared his source of authority for making these demands upon them. When he said “**this**” he was clearly referring to his last command to give thanks in everything, but he could also be including all three

of these injunctions: rejoice, pray, and give thanks. “**God’s will**” (*thelēma*) includes all of the attitudes and actions which God desires that believers practice continually, as indicated by the present tense of the imperatives we have just reviewed. “**In Christ Jesus**” is explained by one scholar this way: “Christ Jesus Himself is the pattern and source of such a life. It found supreme manifestation in His earthly life, and it is only in union with Him that such a life is possible for the believer. It is the product of the new life received from Him and made operative in them by the indwelling Holy Spirit.” [Hiebert, 261]

One of the common questions heard among believers today is “What is the will of God for my life?” This verse and the others in this section provide an excellent answer to that question by giving a clear expression of God’s will for believers who desire to live in a way that pleases Him. If believers can work toward implementing these instructions, then they will gain the right perspective, and the answers to their other questions about their daily lives may come into focus as well.

1 Thess 5:19-20 – Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances.

These verses and the ones that follow seem to be addressing a common theme, representing an issue that may have arisen among the Thessalonians. Paul gave two negative commands, followed by three positive imperatives, all of which were expressed using the present tense which signifies habitual or continuous action. First, he said, “**Do not quench the Spirit.**” The word for “**quench**” (*sbennumi*) means to extinguish, hinder, or thwart. This may refer to anything in the believers’ life that might hinder their devotion to God or their sensitivity to the promptings of the indwelling Holy Spirit. That is a perfectly valid application of the truth expressed in 5:19.

However, when considered alongside the next phrase, “**do not despise prophetic utterances**,” Paul may also be telling the Thessalonians not to downplay or minimize the ministry of those among them who were exercising the Holy Spirit’s gift of prophecy. The word “**despise**” (*exoutheneō*) means to set at naught or consider worthless. Evidently there were some within the church who were rejecting any prophetic utterances, including those that were given through the legitimate gift of prophecy which functioned in the early church until the completion of the New Testament. As one commentator explained, “The prophetic function held an important place in the life of the early church. In Ephesians 4:11 the prophets were named next to the apostles as Christ’s gift to the church. They were the human channels through whom the Spirit made known His will and purpose for His people.”

[Hiebert, 263]

The phrase “**prophetic utterances**” is from the single Greek noun *prophēteia* which can include predictions as well as divine teaching given through the special gift of God for the early church age (e.g., Acts 13:1; 15:32; 21:10; Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10; 1 Pet 1:20-21). One lexicon defines prophecy as, “a discourse emanating from divine inspiration and declaring the purposes of God, whether by reproving and admonishing the wicked, or comforting the afflicted, or revealing things hidden; especially by foretelling future events.” [Thayer, 552] The point of these two verses was to command the Thessalonians negatively – do **not** minimize or despise those God-given, Spirit-inspired pronouncements.

1 Thess 5:21-22 – But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Here Paul commanded the Thessalonians positively by declaring what actions they should be taking. First, when prophetic utterances were given, the church should “**exam-**

ine” (*dokimazō*) the statements. As it did in 2:4, this Greek word means to examine and confirm by a process of testing. It pictures an assayer who crushes, melts, and tests mineral ore to verify the quality of precious metal. This term is conceptually similar to the word *discernment*, which is an important Christian character trait that allows believers to examine something in order to determine whether it is in alignment with the will and Word of God (Phil 1:9-10). As one scholar stated, “There are things that appear on the surface to be good. There are manifestations that are claimed to come from God. Such are not simply to be accepted at their face value, for it is not part of Christian simplicity to be credulous. All things must be tested. And not simply tested, but accepted wholeheartedly or rejected decisively as a result of the test.”

[Morris, 179]

The Thessalonians were to “**hold fast**” (*katechō*) to that which is good, meaning that they were to keep a firm grasp or gain possession of a thing for the purpose of safekeeping. In other words, they were to embrace only those things they had examined and found to be “**good**” (*kalos*), excellent, right, and true. By contrast, they were to “**abstain from**” (*apechō*) other things. This word carries the idea of keeping one’s distance or remaining far away from something. They were to reject everything “**evil**” (*ponēros*), meaning anything they found to be unsound, wrong, wicked, worthless, or which could lead to destructive consequences for the members of the body of Christ.

In these five verses (5:19-22) Paul provided some needed instructions for handling situations in which church members were speaking as if from God. At that time in church history the spiritual gift of prophecy was operative, and believers needed to know how to determine whether those utterances were indeed from God. In that regard, this is an important passage, and later the apostle Paul would give even more detailed instructions in his first letter to the Corinthians. There

he would outline specific procedures for conducting services in which one or more prophets were speaking. For example, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor 14:29-33). That passage conveys a message similar to the brief instruction Paul gave to the Thessalonians here regarding the evaluation of prophetic utterances.

1 Thess 5:23 – Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The words “**Now may**” mark the beginning of Paul’s final prayer for the Thessalonians. In 5:13 he had commanded them to “live in peace with one another,” and here in this verse he identified the source of all true peace – the “**God of peace.**” One scholar explains this peace:

The meaning is, God who is the source and giver of peace. Peace, in the Pauline sense, is not mere calm or tranquility. It is always conceived as based upon reconciliation with God. God is the God of peace only to those who have ceased to be at war with him, and are at one with him. God’s peace is not sentimental but moral. Hence the God of peace is the sanctifier. “Peace” is habitually used, both in the Old and New Testaments, in connection with the messianic salvation. The Messiah himself will be Peace (Mic 5:5). Peace is associated with righteousness as a messianic blessing (Psa 72:7; Psa 85:10). Peace, founded in reconciliation with God, is the theme of the gospel (Act 10:36). The gospel is the gospel of peace (Eph 2:17; Eph 6:15; Rom 10:15). Christ is the giver of peace (John 14:27; John 16:33). [Vincent, 52]

Paul prayed that God would “**sanctify**” (*hagiazō*), which means to declare or make something holy (*hagios*); to consecrate or set something apart for a sacred purpose. Even

though Paul had exhorted them to “walk in a manner worthy of God” (2:12) and to “walk and please God” (4:1), here he recognized that only God Himself can sanctify a believer. As a theological concept, sanctification has past, present, and future aspects. One commentator explained, “Sanctification can refer to the initial salvation experience (justification) as sinners are set apart for God and from sin positionally (Heb 10:10-17; 1 Pet 1:2). It can also refer to the practice of believers as they live apart from sin in their day-to-day lives (1 Pet 1:14-16). The third way sanctify can be used is of our future deliverance from sin when the Lord returns and deals with the curse of sin (Rom 8:18-30; Phil 3:20-21).” [Stallard, 115]

In this verse it seems best to view Paul as focusing on the completion of the believers’ sanctification at the coming of the Lord. Paul expressed this in several ways. First, he asked that God sanctify them “**entirely**” (*holotelēs*), using a Greek compound word consisting of the word “whole” and *telos* which means “to the end” or having reached its goal. The translation “entirely” implies “in all its parts,” and this would be an apt application based on Paul’s list of “**spirit and soul and body**.” He desires that all aspects of the whole person would reach the consummation of perfection at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ – that all would be transformed, including the body, mind, will, emotions, and spirit.

Paul stated this desire for the Thessalonians in two ways, both of which express the idea of reaching the ultimate goal at the time their future sanctification is complete: “sanctify entirely” and “preserved complete.” The word “**complete**” (*holoklēros*) is also a compound word consisting of “whole” and *klēros* which means an assigned portion or inheritance. This carries the idea of the whole consisting of all of its parts, but it also points to a future condition when the whole person will be faultless in all respects. Paul affirms this in the next phrase: “**without blame**” (*amemptōs*) or blameless (cf. 3:13) at the “**coming of our Lord Jesus Christ**.” The “God

of peace Himself” is the only One who can accomplish this in the lives of His children, and in this verse Paul laid this request before Him in worshipful prayer.

1 Thess 5:24 – Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

Paul now reassured the Thessalonians that God is indeed able to accomplish all of this for them. Here he focused on the fact that the God who initially “**called**” (*kaleō*) them will be faithful to carry them through to the end. God is “**faithful**” (*pistos*), meaning that He is completely trustworthy. The Thessalonians can rely on Him to “**bring it to pass**” (*poieō*), which is the common word for making or doing something. In his later epistle to the Philippian believers, Paul would express this same sentiment when he declared, “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6).

1 Thess 5:25 – Brethren, pray for us.

In 5:23 Paul had shared his prayer for the Thessalonians, so now he asks them to pray for him. This is something that Paul will ask again in 2 Thess 3:1, and in general he sincerely appreciated the prayers of brethren everywhere (e.g., Col 4:2).

1 Thess 5:26 – Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.

The key word in this sentence is “**brethren**,” which clearly characterizes the relationship between Christians as brothers and sisters in the family of God. In the early church, a “**holy**” or fraternal kiss was an appropriate expression for greeting the brethren in the Lord. Even in our own day, greeting a member of one’s own family with a kiss has been considered appropriate. The common practice in Paul’s day would be similar to how we might greet a family member today with a loving embrace. Even among people who are not related, a warm handshake or grasping of the arm is custom-

ary, along with words of kind regard and appreciation. Rather than originating from natural affection or mere social courtesy, this type of greeting recognizes the fellowship and unity between all of the members of Christ's family, and it is intended as an expression of true Christian love of the brethren (*philadelphia*, 4:9).

1 Thess 5:27 – I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

Here at the end of the letter Paul wanted to ensure that these words would be heard by each and every one of the believers in Thessalonica. To “**adjure**” (*enorkizō*) is to put someone under oath, obtaining their solemn promise that they will do what you ask. Paul called upon “**the Lord**” as his authority and as the witness for their promise. It is likely that he expected this letter to be presented to the entire church in a formal gathering to hear the public reading of Paul's letter. He wanted these words read aloud to all the brethren, rather than simply having a few individuals read it to themselves and then interpret it for others. In this letter Paul had addressed matters of common interest and had given instruction for the benefit of every believer in the church. Although he did not explicitly say so, as an apostle of Christ, Paul may have been aware that he had written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the composition of this letter, and that Christ was giving authoritative, infallible instructions to the church through him. In any case, Paul wanted the Thessalonians to consider the reading of this letter to be a solemn obligation.

1 Thess 5:28 – The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Paul's final words end, just as he had begun (1:1), with “**grace**” (*charis*). As previously noted, “grace” is the unmerited favor of God. Because of our sinful condition, there is

nothing that any person can do to earn the favor of a holy God. He sets His love upon individuals based solely on His own sovereign choice and on what Jesus Christ has accomplished on our behalf. Everything that we are, that we have, or that we do is purely from the grace of God.

Summary

Paul began this final section of his letter by encouraging the brethren to respect and appreciate the leaders who are accountable for the health and welfare of the church. They were to live in peaceful submission to the leadership of the local church, rather than behaving in an unruly fashion. As members of the family of God they were to prop up the weak and bear with the failings of others in love. Their lives should be characterized by rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving while they were keeping a firm grasp on the truths and traditions they were taught. Paul reminded them that above all they should trust in the faithfulness of God.

Background of the Second Letter

In examining the history of Paul's Thessalonian ministry we have the advantage of the divinely inspired record from the Book of Acts. All of that background helps to place the Thessalonian letters into the context of the triumphs and challenges faced by the early church as it spread the gospel message in ever-widening circles from its origin at Jerusalem. It had only been a few months since Paul's departure from Thessalonica when he received Timothy's report about the persistent faith, love, and hope of those believers and their eager desire to be reunited with Paul and his companions in the near future. That encouraging news was what prompted Paul to write his first letter to the Thessalonians.

In his initial letter to the brethren in Thessalonica Paul had felt the need to set the record straight concerning what had happened before, during, and after his ministry there. He was not defending himself to the church, because they were not the ones bringing false accusations against him. Several times he actually called the Thessalonians themselves as witnesses in his defense. Apparently Paul wanted the church to have a written statement, like an affidavit, from which they could gain reassurance and confidence concerning the character and quality of his ministry among them. They could also use his statements to refute any lingering charges that might be made against him or them in the future.

It was clear from the content of Paul's first letter that he and his companions had taught the church many of the foundational truths of the Christian faith. We do not have a full list of these doctrines, but Paul gave hints concerning many of the things he had shared with them during his brief ministry in Thessalonica. Examples of these truths include the following, which are either directly stated or implied in the text of Paul's first letter.

- The historical facts of the life and ministry of Jesus
- Many of the sayings and teachings of the Lord Jesus
- The opposition of the Jewish leaders to Christ's ministry
- The identity of Jesus as the long-expected Messiah and Savior
- The facts concerning His trial, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension
- The theological significance of Christ's substitutionary and atoning death
- The sin nature of humanity and peoples' hopelessness apart from Christ
- The clear message of the gospel and the necessity of its acceptance by faith alone
- Christ's current ministry from His position in heaven today
- The absolute deity of Jesus Christ as co-equal with God the Father and the Holy Spirit
- God's sending of the Holy Spirit with a new ministry for indwelling believers
- The new capabilities believers have as a result of the powerful work of the Spirit in them
- God's pretemporal election of believers, reflected in His choice of them in eternity past
- The past, present, and future aspects of God's sanctification of His children
- The types of behaviors and character qualities that must flow from the life of a redeemed person

- God’s sovereign love and care for His children, even in the midst of opposition and persecution
- The obligation of believers to share with others the reason for their changed lives
- The inevitability of opposition and persecution from an unbelieving world
- The facts concerning spiritual warfare and the reality of the demonic realm
- The existence of Satan, his evil character, and the nature of his opposition to God
- The true nature of idolatry, especially that of the idols common in their pagan culture
- The power of God’s Word and the necessity of growing in understanding of God’s written revelation
- The spiritual gifts given as part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit for the church age, including the nature of the specific gift of prophecy which was providing new revelation that would complete the New Testament
- The future Tribulation period during which God’s righteous wrath would be poured out in judgment on the ungodly
- The special coming of Jesus to gather church-age saints who will rise in resurrection to return with Him to the place He has prepared for them in heaven
- The fact that both living and previously deceased church-age believers will participate in the Rapture
- The future coming of Jesus in glory to establish His prophesied kingdom rule on earth
- The appointment of qualified leaders to manage the affairs of each local church
- The obligation of believers to earn a living to provide for their own needs, which will establish their good reputation within their community
- The responsibility of Christians to walk in a manner worthy of God who has called them

- The necessity of believers to stand firm in their faith, despite outward circumstances
- The fact that God desires fellowship and communion with His children through the important activities of regular prayer, praise, and worship
- The essential quality of holiness and separation from sin in the life of a believer, especially in the areas of sexual purity and brotherly kindness
- The fact that, even though Christ paid the penalty and took the wrath that the saints deserve, He will evaluate believers' work and they will experience reward or loss of reward based on the evidence of their lives
- The primary responsibility of church leaders to continually teach the truths of God's Word and to uphold sound doctrine

The list above probably captures only a small portion of what Paul actually shared during his ministry in Thessalonica, but it is clear that he had provided instruction across a broad spectrum of Christian doctrine and practice. How many of us can say that we have received as much from the ministry of the local churches we have attended?

There is no record of how Paul's first letter was delivered to the church in Thessalonica. It may have been carried by Timothy or Silas or one of the other trustworthy saints who were with them in Corinth at the time it was written. We can assume that the letter was read aloud publicly to all the brethren in Thessalonica, and that it stimulated much discussion, self-examination, and exhortation among the saints in the local church. The Thessalonians positively regarded Paul's thanksgiving and joy concerning their faith, hope, and love. They clearly acknowledged the quality of Paul's ministry to them, based on the written record of his defense against the charges brought by his opponents, because Paul will not feel the need to renew his defense in his second letter. We can assume that his first letter was effective in ministering to many

of the believers who needed specific comfort or admonition.

We do not know how Paul received news regarding the results of his first letter, but obviously he was inspired to write to them again in order to address several additional areas of concern. He heard that persecution was continuing or intensifying, so he wanted to give additional comfort and encouragement for them to remain steadfast in their faith. It was also reported to him that his opponents had tried a new tactic – falsifying a letter supposedly from Paul – in order to throw the Thessalonians into confusion regarding the future coming of the Lord. This would prompt Paul to provide new and unique details about the signs that would precede the Tribulation as well as the events concerning the man of lawlessness. One commentator declared, “No other portion of the prophetic Scriptures covers precisely the same points of revelation here given,” [Hiebert, 324] so Paul’s response to this local issue in Thessalonica would serve as an important revelation for the church throughout its history. Finally, the situation with the unruly brethren had not been resolved, so Paul would need to address that issue in even stronger terms than he had before. With this background in view, we can begin to examine Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians.

God's Righteous Judgment

(2 Thessalonians 1:1-12)

As Paul did in his first letter, he began this letter with the **signature** which identified who was writing the letter. This would be followed by the **address**, identifying the intended recipients, and then a **salutation** expressing Paul's joy at the grace of God for believers. The **ascription of appreciation** would then give thanks for things Paul appreciated about the Thessalonians, and typically this would be followed by Paul's prayer for his readers. Then the main body of the letter would follow, with a conclusion that usually included personal greetings.

2 Thess 1:1 – Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

This **signature** and **address** are identical to that of his first letter, with only the word “**our**” being added to identify Paul, his companions, and all of his readers as spiritual children of their common Father. Here, as in the first letter, Paul addressed the organized church, consisting of those who are “**in**” (*en*) Christ. To be “**in Christ**” means that, at the time of their salvation, believers were placed into the body of Christ through the Holy Spirit's special baptizing ministry for the church age (1 Cor 12:13). As a unique entity, the church had its beginning on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and it will culminate at the Rapture of church-age saints (1 Thess 4:16-17).

Once again we see Paul putting the Lord Jesus Christ on the same level of equality as God the Father, which is a clear statement of the deity of Jesus. As mentioned previously, the word “**Lord**” (*kurios*) emphasized Christ’s absolute deity, the name “**Jesus**” acknowledged His humanity, while the word “**Christ**” identified Him as the prophesied Savior and Deliverer.

2 Thess 1:2 – Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As in his first letter, Paul’s salutation included both “**grace**” and “**peace**.” Especially since the persecution in Thessalonica had intensified, Paul must emphasize the grace and peace of God. Grace can motivate a life that pleases God, and peace provides assurance and comfort even in the midst of difficult circumstances. In this letter Paul also mentioned the source of grace and peace, which is “**from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**.” The grace and peace that believers need in order to handle the trials of life do not come from within themselves, but they are provided by God Himself through His indwelling Holy Spirit. This verse again affirms the equal deity of God the Father and Christ the Son.

2 Thess 1:3 – We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater;

Here Paul began the *ascription of appreciation* by giving thanks to God for his beloved “**brethren**” at Thessalonica. By using the word “**ought**” (*opheilō*) he insisted that he was duty-bound to praise them because it was no more than they deserved. As in the first letter, Paul was “**always**” in the habit of bringing his thoughts, concerns, and desires to God whenever they came to mind. He again used the Greek preposition *peri* which typically means “around” to picture

how he was encircling them in prayer. Paul felt a personal obligation to give thanks for them since it was “**fitting**” (*ax- ios*), suitable, appropriate, and well-deserved. “**Because**” (*hoti*) introduced his two reasons this was appropriate. First, their faith had been “**greatly enlarged**” (*huperauxanō*), which means to increase beyond measure. One way of picturing their faith would be as a tree that has grown well above the height which would normally be expected for its age. It was reported to Paul that the faith of the Thessalonians had grown stronger despite the difficult circumstances under which they lived.

Second, their selfless “**love**” (*agapē*) for others had “**grown greater**” (*pleonazō*). This is the same word Paul had used in 1 Thess 3:12 where he prayed, “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.” This comparison tells us that Paul’s prayers, as recorded in the first letter, were indeed being answered by God in the lives of the Thessalonians. It is a joy as well as an obligation to give thanks for the ways in which God has fulfilled the petitions presented to Him in prayer.

2 Thess 1:4 – therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.

The word “**Therefore**” (*hōste*, “consequently”) introduced what Paul did as a result of hearing about the growing faith and love of the Thessalonians. Their evident spiritual growth provided him with an opportunity to encourage other churches using the Thessalonians as an exceptional example of how believers should behave in order to please God. The words “**speak proudly**” are from the single Greek word *enkauchaomai*, which means to boast or talk with excessive pride and satisfaction about something. This is related to the

word Paul had used in 1 Thess 2:19 where he said that the Thessalonians were his “hope or joy or crown of **exultation**.” Here Paul explained that the Thessalonians were the perfect example for him to share with other believers who were struggling to maintain their faith while enduring similar circumstances. “Paul was not above praising one church to other churches, to provoke them to good works. Here he is boasting of Thessalonica in Macedonia to the Corinthians as he did later to the Corinthians about the collection (2 Cor 8:1-15) after having first boasted to the Macedonians about the Corinthians (2 Cor 9:1-5).” [Robertson, 42] It is important to understand that our response to our circumstances can help other believers to grow if we are setting a good example for them.

There were several aspects of the Thessalonians’ behavior that Paul was eager to point out. First he mentioned their “**perseverance**” using the Greek word *hupomonē*, which literally means to remain under. This is the same word Paul had used when he praised their “steadfastness of hope” (1 Thess 1:3), and it has the idea of patient endurance while undergoing affliction. The Thessalonians became a perfect example of patiently waiting for God’s deliverance during difficult circumstances, while at the same time maintaining the vitality of their “**faith**” (*pistis*). In many cases, trying times can cause a believer to weaken in his faith or to waver in his trust in God. Some have given up and abandoned the Christian life because the road was too difficult, and some became frustrated that God had never quite been able to measure up to their own unrealistic expectations.

Here Paul commended the Thessalonians for remaining faithful despite their circumstances. Their perseverance and faith were especially noteworthy because they were demonstrated in the midst of all kinds of “**persecutions**,” using the Greek word *diogmos* which means to be hunted down or harassed, especially for religious reasons. In addition Paul men-

tioned their “**afflictions**” (*thlipsis*), which pictured the constant pressure they were under from their opponents. In his first letter Paul had said, “For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know” (1 Thess 3:3-4). It is possible that being forewarned about persecution made it somewhat less shocking when it arrived.

At the end of this verse Paul had mentioned “all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.” The word “**endure**” (*anechomai*) means to hold oneself upright and firm, and the present tense carries the idea that they were “right now continuously enduring” affliction. The picture is of a person holding himself straight and tall while others are trying to bend, weigh down, and break him with an excessive load. If a believer can behave this way under the stresses of life in a fallen world, then he truly can be a shining example and an encouragement to others. When we trust God in the midst of trials, then He is able to develop patience and maturity in our lives. However, the opposite is also true: if we rebel against our circumstances, then we will remain immature and impatient. It seems that God never wastes any aspect of suffering in the life of a believer since it can build important character qualities which can then become a model for others to imitate.

2 Thess 1:5 – 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.

The believers’ life of faith in the midst of suffering is a “**plain indication**” (*endeigma*) that they have been “**considered worthy**” (*kataxioō*) of future participation in the kingdom of God. The aorist tense and passive voice of the verb *kataxioō* express a definite point-in-time action that was taken for them by God. The word itself does not mean “to

earn worthiness” but “to **declare** worthiness.” Their worthiness for future blessings in God’s kingdom could not be earned by any behavior or action on their part, but it was established at the time they placed their trust in Christ. The Thessalonians’ faithful response to persecution only served as a plain indication of what God had already declared to be true. One commentator has said, “There is no idea that their endurance of suffering constituted a merit that gained them membership in the kingdom. The thought is that all is of God....Then at the end it is not said that they are worthy but that they are counted worthy. It is still all of God. God gives the verdict in accordance with his eternal purpose.” [Morris, 198]

When Paul used the phrase “**the kingdom of God**” he was not referring to heaven or salvation in general or to the church, for they are not the kingdom of God. Paul is pointing to the prophesied messianic kingdom when Christ will reign on David’s throne in Jerusalem (e.g., Isa 9:6-7). The outward behavior of the Thessalonians confirmed the inward truth that they were devoted church-age saints who will eventually participate in Christ’s kingdom (1 Thess 2:12). Their faithful endurance under persecution confirmed that they had already been declared worthy of the kingdom by God.

Those who are suffering for their faith may wonder whether God allows the righteous to suffer without punishing their persecutors. All of what Paul had said proves that there will be a righteous judgment in the future during which their persecutors will be punished. One scholar explained that “the righteous judgment is still future and grace is still calling them to endure...that He will not allow their unjust sufferings to go unpunished.” [Hiebert, 307] In the verses that follow, Paul will show that their faithful endurance and steadfastness will result in the righteous judgment of their oppressors.

2 Thess 1:6 – For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

This sentence in the Greek text has only nine words arranged in an unusual structure. Literally it might be translated: “since a righteous thing with God to repay those afflicting you, affliction.” The Greek word *dikaïos*, translated “righteous” in 1:5 and “**just**” here, links both verses. In the previous one Paul had mentioned “God’s righteous judgment,” but here this verse makes it clear that God’s righteous judgment involves repaying those who persecute others with persecution in kind. To “**repay**” (*antapodidōmī*) is a double compound word that means to give back again, to repay in kind, or recompense fully.

This affirms that there will be a future judgment. Justice demands that a righteous God punish those who now persecute others. Ultimately it would be unjust for the persecutors to go unpunished. As one commentator said:

It will be a righteous thing for God to punish the wicked in a future state, for they are not always punished here as they deserve. No one can seriously maintain that there is an equal distribution of rewards and punishments on the earth. Many a man goes to the grave having received no adequate punishment for his crimes. Many a murderer, pirate, robber, traitor, and plunderer of nations under the name of a conqueror, thus dies. No one can doubt that it would be a just thing to punish them here if they could be arrested. Why should it be any less just to punish them when they enter another world? [Barnes, 71]

In our society today it may be considered politically incorrect or intolerant to speak of a doctrine like God’s righteous judgment and the punishment of the wicked, but every person has a built-in sense of justice which cries out for those who treat others badly to be given the punishment they rightfully deserve. And, of course, the Bible clearly affirms that every person will be held accountable before a holy God at one of the judgments described in Scripture. This section of Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians provides a revealing glimpse into what this ultimate judgment will look like.

2 Thess 1:7 – and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,

While the previous verse confirmed that God will judge the persecutors, this verse affirms the eventual relief that will come to those being persecuted. Just as it is right and proper to punish the wicked, so it will be fitting to give rest to those who are afflicted. “**Relief**” (*anesis*) involves letting loose or relaxing the pressure, which is the antidote to *thlipsis* (“pressure”). Paul expressed his desire for this kind of relief, too, because he was also under intense pressure.

The last part of this verse combined with the following three verses relate to the time when God will judge the unrighteous. This verse described the future time of His coming as having several characteristics. First, the clause beginning with “**when**” is literally “in the revelation” (*en to apokalypsei*) of the Lord Jesus. This “**revealing**” of the Lord Jesus is identified as a coming “**from heaven.**” Since heaven is the current dwelling place of Jesus, any “coming” would require that He depart from heaven. At the time of this revealing of Christ from heaven He will be accompanied by “**His mighty angels**” (literally, “the angels of His power”). From a human perspective these angels themselves will appear quite powerful, but this verse clarified that any power they exercise is due solely to Christ’s power working through them. One commentator says that they are “angels associated with His power. The power belongs to Christ, and the angels will be the executors of His commands.” [Hiebert, 311] Jesus Himself mentioned His angelic companions in Matthew 16:27 and 25:31.

The final characteristic is stated at the end of this verse: “**in flaming fire.**” It seems best to view this phrase as describing Jesus Himself at the time of His coming in judgment

(NASB, ASV, LSB, RSV), rather than attaching it to the verse that follows (ESV, KJV, NKJV, NIV). This description is apparently derived from Isaiah 66:15 which says that “the LORD will come in fire and His chariots like the whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire.” That Isaiah passage actually states both cases, so it is possible Paul intended either of them.

This clearly refers to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in judgment at the end of the Tribulation period. The description given here does not correspond to Jesus’ coming at the Rapture of church-age saints. One commentator explained:

Relief will come when the Lord returns. With this verse and the next, Paul describes Christ coming from heaven to bring judgment and retribution. This coming should not be mistaken for the Rapture in which the Church saints are resurrected and the living saints are transformed and taken by the Lord to glory. Instead, in verses 7-8, Paul is saying that He deals out retribution to those who have not obeyed the gospel, and such dealings will take place during the seven years of tribulation....But first the Rapture of the Church, followed by the Tribulation, and then the revealing of Him as the earthly King and Judge. [Couch, 187]

Even though there will be relief for church-age believers at the Rapture, there will be no judgment at that time as described in this verse and the ones that follow. God’s righteous judgment of the ungodly awaits a subsequent future revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven.

2 Thess 1:8 – dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

This verse affirms the truth presented previously, that God will “repay with affliction those who afflict” others. Here this activity is described as “**dealing out retribution**,” and the word “**retribution**” (*ekdikēsis*) comes from the root word *dikē* meaning “justice,” so retribution is literally “out-justice.” Its synonyms include righteous vengeance, vindication, or

punishment. The exact nature of that punishment will be explained in the following verse, but here Paul identified two aspects of the ungodly that qualify them for facing God's retribution.

First, they are those who **“do not know God.”** This does not mean that these people are completely ignorant concerning the existence of God. Even those who have not been taught about the God of the Bible are still without excuse, because “that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made” (Rom 1:19-20). What Paul was declaring here in 1:8 is that the ungodly are willfully ignorant since they have deliberately chosen to place no value on God.

The second aspect of the ungodly is that they **“do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”** This describes people who have heard the good news about what Jesus accomplished for them through His substitutionary death on the cross – that the ungodly can find reconciliation with a holy God by grace through faith in Christ. However, to hear the gospel is not sufficient. People must understand this message, believe that it is true, and place their trust in the Lord Jesus as their only Savior from sin. Therefore, those who know the gospel but who do not obey or submit to it are included in the group designated as unrighteous ones.

“Those who do not know God” refers, of course, not to people who have never heard of the true God, but to those who are culpably ignorant. It is the sort of thing that Paul speaks of in Romans 1:28, where he refers to people who “did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God.” The second clause is then a specific example of this, and the most heinous of all, for it involves the rejection of the revelation that God has given in his Son. The gospel is a message of good news, but it is also an invitation from the King of kings. Rejection of the gospel accordingly is disobedience to a royal invitation. [Morris, 203-204]

There are also those who “profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed” (Titus 1:16). All of these descriptions paint a picture for us of the people who are ripe for God’s righteous judgment.

2 Thess 1:9 – These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

This verse describes probably the most significant aspect of the recompense and retribution that the ungodly will incur. Using the future tense, Paul said that these individuals will “**pay the penalty**” (*tinō*). This verb by itself means to pay a penalty or incur punishment, but Paul added the word “**just**” (*dikē*) which also carries the idea of a sentence of punishment and a righteous judgment. Together these words communicate that the ungodly are only being given what they rightfully or justly deserve.

Their penalty is declared to be “**eternal destruction.**” The word “**destruction**” (*olethros*) does not mean annihilation or the end of existence. This is the same word Paul used in his first letter, where it carried the idea of complete and hopeless ruin, with the loss of everything that gives meaning to life (1 Thess 5:3). One commentator said the ungodly “will not be annihilated, but will live and linger on in destruction. It seems difficult to conceive how anyone can profess to hold that this passage is a part of the Word of God, and yet deny the doctrine of future eternal punishment. It would not be possible to state that doctrine in clearer language than this.”

[Barnes, 73]

“**Eternal**” (*aiōnios*) literally means throughout the age, referring to the same age as that in which believers will experience “eternal” life. The implication is that this “eternal destruction” will never end.

The adjective ‘everlasting’ means literally ‘age-long,’ and everything depends on the length of the age. In the New Testament there is never a hint that the coming age has an end – it is the continuing life of the world to come. When the life of believers beyond the grave is spoken of, it is with the use of this same adjective. ‘Eternal life’ is the life that belongs to the age to come; therefore it has no end. At the same time eternal is a quality of life. It is not only that life in the age to come will be longer than life here: it will also be of a different quality. All of this has to be borne in mind when we consider the other expression ‘everlasting destruction.’ It is the opposite of eternal life. It is the end of all that is worthwhile in life....Those who oppose the things of God here and now are not engaged in some minor error that can easily be put right in the hereafter. They are engaging in that defiance of the will of God which has eternal consequences. [Morris, 204-205]

As hinted previously, the most significant aspect of “eternal destruction” – the loss of everything that gives meaning to life – will result from being completely separated **“from the presence of the Lord.”** The word **“presence”** (*prosōpon*) is literally “the face” or the actual, personal, face-to-face presence of God. The Bible records only a few isolated cases of people who have experienced the presence of God in a way that is similar to what is described in this verse. This makes it difficult for the rest of us to understand the scope and depth of the blessedness that the direct presence of God will bring to our lives in eternity. Most people throughout human history have lived without being aware of the blessed presence of God, and even those who have encountered the presence of the Lord have done so only in a limited way. Our darkened existence here in a fallen world (1 Cor 13:12) makes it almost impossible to grasp the blessing which awaits us in the presence of the Lord.

God’s Word does provide glimpses of life in His presence. For example we read, “In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Ps 16:11). And, “For You make him most blessed forever; You make him joy-

ful with gladness in Your presence” (Ps 21:6). It requires an exercise of faith in order to imagine the fullness of blessing available in His presence. As the writer to the Hebrews expressed it, “Faith...gives us assurance about things we cannot see....They were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Heb 11:1, 16, NLT). Believers will be thrilled beyond belief at the blessed life that awaits them in the presence of God.

However, this verse states that the ungodly will experience “eternal destruction, **away from** the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” As one scholar wrote: “Banishment from the Lord’s presence is what Jesus taught about punishment (Matt 7:23; 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; Luke 13:27). Words cannot adequately express the misery of this condition.” [Thomas, 878] Just as *believers* may find it difficult to understand the extent of heaven’s future *blessings*, the *ungodly* may find it difficult to understand the extent of their future hopeless *ruin* through separation from God’s presence and glory. Some have said that the idea of hell cannot be any worse than the hell on earth they have experienced during their lifetime. But according to God’s Word, the eternal destruction experienced by the ungodly will be infinitely worse than anything they could imagine. The ungodly will be terrified beyond belief at the misery that awaits them apart from the presence of God.

2 Thess 1:10 – when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed.

Paul concluded this sentence by again mentioning the coming of Christ in judgment (cf. 1:7). “**When**” (*hotan*) does not specify the time of His coming, but it affirms the certainty of it. As it did in 1:7, this clearly refers to the coming of the

Lord in judgment at the end of the Tribulation period. This coming of Christ has different characteristics than His previous coming at the Rapture when He will glorify church-age saints through resurrection. In the coming described in this verse it is not the saints who receive glory, but the Lord Himself who is glorified. This will be the first opportunity that those remaining alive on earth at the end of the Tribulation will have to see Christ's glory manifested in the redemption of the His saints who will accompany Him to earth. One commentator says, "His glory will not be displayed in the world when the Rapture takes place and He carries the redeemed away into heaven. In heaven, we will certainly see the glory of His deity. His earthly glory, although certainly related to His deity, has to do with His glorification when He comes as the reigning King, the Son of David." [Couch, 192]

The phrase "**to be marveled at among all who have believed**" is somewhat difficult to interpret. The word "**marveled**" (*thaumazō*) means to regard with astonishment, and Christ's descent from heaven to earth in flaming fire with His mighty angels (1:7) and a vast company of resurrected church-age saints (1:10) is sure to cause intense awe and wonder. One option for identifying those "**among all who have believed**" is that they will be living believers who survive the Tribulation period. They will come to faith in Christ during the darkest period of human history (Matt 24:21-22), a time in which few glimmers of righteousness exist. Witnessing the glorious coming of their Lord would indeed cause them to marvel in astonishment.

They will also be astounded to see the unimaginable number of resurrected church-age believers returning with Christ. Living believers have difficulty imagining how many other saints may be living during their own time, so it would be almost impossible to imagine the vast number of believers who have lived throughout the entire church age. The world has never seen exactly how large that number is, because Chris-

tians living at any single period of time have been relatively few in number as well as being scattered across the globe. Yet the Scriptures tell us that all of those raptured church-age saints in their glorified bodies will accompany Jesus upon His return to earth (1 Thess 3:13).

At the end of this verse, and without much explanation, Paul added **“for our testimony to you was believed.”** Since he has been referring to the vast number of church-age believers who will accompany Christ at His second coming, Paul ended by personally addressing the Thessalonians (“**you**” plural). In effect he is saying, “You Thessalonians are in this category of those who have believed.” One commentator said that “the Thessalonians believed because they accepted the witness of Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Therefore, this assembly is counted among the believers.” [Couch, 193] Since they themselves are church-age saints, then they will be among the great number of resurrected believers who will return to earth with Christ at His second coming in judgment.

2 Thess 1:11 – To this end also we pray for you always, 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 final two verses of this chapter Paul will share some of the things he is praying for the Thessalonians. As he did previously, he assured them that he **“always”** remembers them in prayer (1 Thess 1:2; 2 Thess 1:3). Paul began this verse with a phrase that connected the content of his prayer to what he had previously said: **“To this end.”** Here Paul may be saying, “In light of your inclusion in the company of believers who will return with Christ at His second coming, we pray for your continued steadfastness in the faith.”

Earlier Paul had explained that their faithful endurance under persecution provided evidence that they had already been declared worthy of the kingdom by the One who made

them worthy (1:5). In this verse Paul repeated the same sentiment: **“that our God will count you worthy of your calling,”** using a form of the same Greek word (*axioō*) which means “to declare worthy.” He always asked God to continue working actively in their lives so that they will live out their faith in a way that is consistent with their high calling in Christ. Paul then added that God would **“fulfill every desire for goodness.”** The word **“desire”** (*eudokia*) in itself implies a good intention or a desire for good, to which Paul added the words **“for goodness”** (*agathōsynē*) in order to intensify the meaning of that phrase. He wanted the Thessalonians to delight in goodness which would lead to good actions.

He also prayed that God would bring to fullness their **“work of faith with power.”** This is a restatement of what Paul had praised them for in his first letter: “constantly bearing in mind your work of faith” (1 Thess 1:3), using the same terms as he did in that earlier phrase. Here, however, Paul also asked that God would accomplish this **“with power”** (*dunamis*). He is asking that God would continue to empower them to accomplish works which advance His will and plan for this age. It is only when God’s work is done through God’s power that God Himself will receive the glory, and that is what Paul will discuss in the closing verse of this chapter.

2 Thess 1:12 – so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“So that” (*hopōs*) gives the purpose for which Paul is praying these things for the Thessalonians. It is not so that they themselves will receive praise and glory for their righteous behavior. The ultimate purpose or goal is that **“our Lord Jesus will be glorified.”** They are to behave properly through God’s strength that works in them, but they are to do this in a way that makes it clear that it is God who deserves

the praise and glory for this work. Their character and behavior should point onlookers to Jesus so that He receives the credit for everything. Their lives should bring glory to Him, and they in turn will receive His praise as a result. God will be **“glorified in you, and you in Him,”** as Jesus had prayed for all future believers, “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them” (John 17:22). This aspect of bringing glory to God is well-illustrated in Jesus’ teaching concerning the vine and the vinedresser in which He said, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples” (John 15:8).

Paul ended this verse by saying that believers who bring glory to God do so **“according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** Here the syntax of the original sentence provides another clear reference to the absolute deity of Jesus Christ. Everything that Paul has prayed for the Thessalonians will only be accomplished through the grace of God which is at work in their lives.

Summary

As Paul gave thanks for the Thessalonians’ faith in the midst of persecution, he wanted to reassure them that there will be justice for those who were afflicting them. Their faith in the midst of suffering was a plain indication that God had declared them worthy of participation in His future kingdom. Their persecutors, however, will experience a completely different future. God’s justice will require that the ungodly pay the full penalty for their sins, and they will be excluded from the presence of the Lord forever. As he concluded this section, Paul prayed that God would receive the glory as He powerfully works in the Thessalonians to “fulfill every desire for goodness” while they live out their faith.

Precursors to God's Wrath

(2 Thessalonians 2:1-12)

As previously mentioned, we do not know how Paul received news regarding the results of his first letter, but obviously it was reported to him that his foes tried a new tactic for confusing and upsetting the Thessalonian believers. His opponents called into question the truth of Paul's teaching about the events of the end times. In this section of his second letter, Paul will confirm his doctrine regarding the timing of the Rapture in relation to the coming judgment at the Day of the Lord. In the process, he will also provide new revelation about the activities of the Antichrist who will make his appearance during the future Tribulation period.

2 Thess 2:1 – Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him,

The verse begins with “**Now**” (*de*) which introduces a new subject that Paul wanted to discuss with the Thessalonians. Initially he will mention his “**request**” (*erōtaō*), taking the same approach with them as he did in 1 Thess 5:12, but he does not say what he is requesting until the next verse. He again addressed them as his beloved “**brethren**,” just as he did eighteen times in the first letter and as he will do seven times in this second letter. This expresses the close family connection they now have in Christ.

In the last part of this verse Paul identified the subject or topic that he will discuss in this section. It is “**with regard to**” or concerning the “**coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**”

In these letters to the Thessalonians Paul had mentioned two distinct “comings” of the Lord. The first was His coming to resurrect church-age saints and to bring them to heaven (1 Thess 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:16-17; 5:4, 9, 23). The second was Christ’s coming in judgment with His angelic host and the resurrected saints at the Day of the Lord (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 1:10; 2:8). It is important to understand which of those two “comings” he referred to here.

In the next phrase Paul specified that he is speaking of the time of “**our gathering together to Him,**” which is the coming of Christ for church-age saints at the Rapture. As we will see in this section, Paul did not hesitate to use a variety of terms to identify the Rapture. Here he used the Greek word *episunagōgē* which is an intensified form of a word that literally means “to lead together” or to collect together in one place. That is an apt description of Christ’s gathering of church-age believers, both living and dead, to meet Him above the earth (1 Thess 4:16-17) and then to take them to the place He has prepared for them in heaven (John 14:3).

Both when he was with the Thessalonians and in his first letter, Paul had instructed them concerning the Rapture. In very clear terms they had been taught that Christ could come for them at any moment, and that they were to live holy lives in the expectation of their rescue from the time of judgment and wrath that is coming upon a Christ-rejecting world. But recently something had happened which caused the Thessalonians’ confidence in this doctrine to be unsettled. That is the situation Paul will begin discussing in this section.

2 Thess 2:2 –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 said they had been “**quickly shaken from their composure.**” To be “**shaken**” (*saleuō*) means to agitate, stir, or cause something to sway as if about to collapse. Something suddenly shook their “**composure**” (*nous*), which is the Greek word for the mind. It had cast doubt on their mental understanding of the doctrine of the Rapture. They reacted by being “**disturbed**” (*throeō*), which can mean to cry aloud or to be in a state of nervous excitement, and by implication to be alarmed or troubled. Paul’s request is that the Thessalonians stop reacting with alarm – that they calm themselves so they can react rationally rather than emotionally.

Next Paul identified the cause of their distress, which consisted of false information concerning the timing of the Day of the Lord and its impact on their expectation of an imminent Rapture. Paul wrote that this false information may have been given to the Thessalonians in three possible ways. “**By a spirit**” points to a prophetic utterance from someone in the assembly who was claiming the authority of divine inspiration for this revelation. Paul had discussed this issue in his first letter to them, where he briefly outlined guidelines for testing the truth of messages being given by those purportedly speaking with the gift of prophecy (1 Thess 5:19-22). “**Or a message**” refers to words that were being circulated as if spoken by the apostle Paul or his missionary companions. They consisted of verbal messages that were falsely attributed to Paul. Those words had not been spoken by Paul, and in fact they were contrary to the known words of Paul with which the Thessalonians were already familiar. “**A letter as if from us**” refers to an unknown epistle attributed to Paul, but which had been forged by his opponents.

The Thessalonians were being told that “**the day of the Lord has come.**” This Day of the Lord is the same period of God’s righteous judgment and wrath that Paul had written about in his first letter to them (1 Thess 5:1-3). Both in his

personal instruction while he was with them and in the first letter, Paul had been clear about the sequential relationship of the Rapture to the Day of the Lord. The Rapture would come first, followed by righteous wrath during the Day of the Lord (1 Thess 1:10; 4:13-18; 5:4, 9). Based on the truth of this earlier instruction, the Thessalonians had been eagerly awaiting the imminent coming of the Lord Jesus to rescue them from that future day of wrath.

But now a contradictory claim was being made, and the Thessalonians began to question whether they had misunderstood Paul or whether they had missed the Rapture altogether, possibly due to some failure in their spiritual life. Or what if Paul had been incorrect and they had been deceived into thinking that Christ's return for them was imminent? The ferocity of the persecution they were suffering may have caused them to think they were indeed living in the period of destruction. Their afflictions may have been severe, like the labor pains of a woman giving birth, and they could see no escape from their suffering (1 Thess 5:3), leading them to wonder whether the Day of the Lord might have begun. How were they to know whether Paul had been correct and that they were not now living in the Day of the Lord? "In answer to this false teaching, Paul not only gives them assurance that they are not in this period, but he also gives them definite signs, the character of which cannot occur while the church is still in the world." [Walvoord, 115]

2 Thess 2:3 – 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,

Paul defended his sequence of end time events by declaring that he had spoken the truth, and that those other messages were actually the deception. The verb "**deceive**" (*exapataō*) means to seduce, beguile, or delude. Paul desired

to set them straight or nudge them back onto the path of sound doctrine. In order to do this, he would clearly identify the prerequisite signs or events that must occur before the righteous wrath of God can be poured out on the unbelieving world. There are no such signs or precursors for the imminent Rapture. However, the Day of the Lord will be preceded by many signs that unmistakably distinguish it. This verse listed two important events that must take place before the Day of the Lord can begin.

Paul said that **“the apostasy comes first.”** This **“apostasy”** (*apostasia*) is from a root word that means to remove, draw away, or depart. The English word “apostasy” has come to mean a defection from the truth, and it is a simple transliteration of this Greek word. But the original Greek word was used to describe several different types of departure. Here Paul simply said that the Day of the Lord cannot begin until after the “departure.” Bible scholars have typically interpreted this departure in one of two ways.

First, the departure may be used figuratively to mean a spiritual departure from the faith. In his final two letters, composed about fifteen years after the Thessalonian epistles, Paul would predict that in the last days there would be a falling away from the truth (1 Tim 4:1-3) which would be characterized by difficult times (2 Tim 3:1-9; 4:3-4). But in those passages he did not use the word *apostasia*; he used it only here in this early letter to the Thessalonians. The fact that Paul did not use this word later to mean a figurative departure from the faith suggests that he did not think *apostasia* was the correct word to convey that concept.

A second way departure can be used is to describe a literal, physical departure of one thing from another. If a physical departure must first transpire before the Day of the Lord can begin, then identifying that departure is crucial. One scholar says, “The answer best suiting all these considerations is a departure of Christians from the earth in the rapture. This

was the subject on Paul's mind and on the minds of the Thessalonians, as the opening words of this very passage show (2 Thess 2:1)." [Wood, 88] In this view Paul is saying that the Thessalonians could not possibly be experiencing the Tribulation because the physical departure of all church-age saints will remove them from the earth before that period of wrath begins. This interpretation clearly fits the context and reaffirms Paul's teaching concerning the timing of the Rapture as it relates to the Day of the Lord.

At the end of this verse Paul introduced another event that must occur before the wrath of the Day of the Lord can begin, and in the following verses he will spend more time elaborating on that aspect of the Tribulation period. The "**man of lawlessness**," also called the "**son of destruction**" must first make his appearance on the stage of world history. This particular individual is briefly described here, but later Paul will provide more details regarding his activities. Here he is characterized by "**lawlessness**" (*anomia*), which seems to refer to his complete disregard for God's standards of righteousness. He could be described as being a law unto himself, or as someone who does whatever he pleases. The final phrase, "**the son of destruction**," indicates that he is born to bring destruction as well as to end in destruction. This is the same phrase Jesus applied to Judas Iscariot. "The terrible phrase, the son of perdition, is applied to Judas in John 17:12 (like Judas, doomed to perdition), but here to the lawless one (*ho anomos*, 2 Thess 2:8), who is not Satan, but some one definite person who is doing the work of Satan." [Robertson, 50]

It is evident that Paul expected the Thessalonians to be familiar with this person from his previous teaching about these things. The following verses provide more information to identify him, as well as making it clear why Paul considered this person to be a crucial sign for the beginning of the Tribulation period.

2 Thess 2:4 – 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.

In this verse Paul will describe the involvement of the man of lawlessness in the religious life of the end times. First, this individual **“opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship.”** This is a broad statement that speaks of his egotistical opposition to other objects of worship, as well as his self-proclaimed superiority, not only to the true God of the Bible, but also to any so-called deity that might be recognized by people in the end times. In an act of self-deification he will demand that he alone be worshipped by the people of the world.

Throughout human history there have been individuals who have asserted their claim to the worship of others. Even in Paul’s own time the Roman emperors often claimed deity and demanded worship from their subjects. One scholar cited an example of such behavior which had happened within the recent memory of Paul and the Thessalonians:

In AD 40 it looked for a short time as if this expected Antichrist had shown his hand. The Emperor Gaius, who took his divinity very seriously, was stung by what he regarded as insulting conduct on the part of the Jews of Jamnia (in western Palestine) to an altar set up in his honour by their Greek neighbours, and gave orders that his statue should be set up in the Jerusalem temple. The legate of Syria was instructed to see that it was done, and to lead two legions to Jerusalem in case there was a revolt. ... In the event, the crisis under Gaius proved not to be the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy: the decree was countermanded at the last moment. ... The day will come, says Paul, when another potentate will actually do what Gaius planned to do: he will not merely erect his image but occupy a throne personally in the temple, claiming to be the manifestation of the supreme God and exacting divine honours. [Bruce, 232-233]

There have been many such examples throughout history, but here Paul is referring to a specific individual who will rise to power at the beginning of that future Day of the Lord. This man will eventually set up a throne in the “**temple (naos)** of God,” which refers to the holy of holies in a rebuilt Jewish temple in Jerusalem. He will take his seat there, “**displaying himself as being God.**” This description of the behavior of the man of lawlessness was predicted by the prophet Daniel hundreds of years before Paul’s day, and Paul evidently had shared those Scriptures with the Thessalonians while he was with them.

2 Thess 2:5 – Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

Here Paul called upon the Thessalonians themselves to remember that while he was with them he had spoken of these things. By teaching from the Old Testament prophets, Paul could have outlined much of the prophetic plan of God for the last days. The Thessalonians would not have been ignorant of the career of this man of lawlessness during the final period of Gentile world domination. Several examples from the Book of Daniel concerning the man of lawlessness are shown below. These passages and others probably would have been taught to the Thessalonians by Paul as part of his ministry of instruction to them.

Ten kings will arise; and another will arise after them, and he will be different from the previous ones and will subdue three kings. He will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time. But the court will sit for judgment, and his dominion will be taken away, annihilated and destroyed forever. (Dan 7:24-26)

He will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; 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. (Dan 9:27)

Then the king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished, for that which is decreed will be done. He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the desire of women, nor will he show regard for any other god; for he will magnify himself above them all. (Dan 11:36-37)

There will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. (Dan 12:1)

Scholars have shown that this man of lawlessness was identified by at least thirty descriptive titles throughout the Bible. Jesus referred to the “ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (Matt 24:15). Paul certainly would have taught them about this key character in God’s prophetic plan.

2 Thess 2:6 – And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed.

In this verse and the two that follow, Paul will focus on the reason why the man of lawlessness had not yet been revealed and why the Day of the Lord could not have begun. Here Paul again reminded the Thessalonians that they should already “**know**” these facts. There is something that “**restrains**” (*katechō*) him, which means to hold down, hinder, or prevent him from being “**revealed**” until the exact time that has been set according to the eternal plan of God. The present tense of “restrains” shows that he is “right now continually being restrained,” and the passive voice of “revealed” indicates that the man of lawlessness will not reveal himself but that God will allow him to be unveiled at the appointed time.

2 Thess 2:7 – 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.

“**For**” (*gar*) indicates that additional evidence or explanation will now be given for what had just been said. Here Paul indicated that some aspect of this lawlessness was a “**mystery**” (*mustērion*), which is defined as a truth that would be incomprehensible apart from divine revelation (cf. 1 Cor 2:7 – “but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory”). One scholar explained, “The mystery of lawlessness is the mass of lawlessness yet hidden, but which is to reveal itself in the person and power of Antichrist.” [Vincent, 64] Lawlessness is “**already at work**” or in progress (1 John 4:3) because it originated in the disobedience and rebellion of fallen men and angels against a holy God. Although lawlessness has existed among men since the Fall, during the Day of the Lord this spirit of lawlessness would become incarnate in the man of lawlessness, and he will be revealed only when the restraints are removed.

As devastating as lawlessness has been throughout human history, it has never reached its peak because there is a powerful restrainer who has been keeping it in check. “**He who now restrains**” must refer to a member of the Godhead, because it requires an all-powerful person to restrain such powerful forces of lawlessness.

In verse 6, the thought is set forth that a certain power has continued down through history to prevent the Antichrist from appearing sooner. This power is designated as “what withholdeth,” which is best taken as a reference to the Holy Spirit. So, then, because the Holy Spirit has continued His work of restraining sin in the world, Satan has been unable to work his wiles through the Antichrist. This implies that Satan’s plan will call for the existence of unrestrained sin, when human beings can be brought to exercise the vilest thoughts and actions. In verse 8, it is plainly stated that, as soon as the Holy Spirit ceases in this work

of restraint, the wicked one will be revealed. [Wood, 111]

The Holy Spirit will continue to restrain lawlessness until He is **“taken out of the way.”** Literally, the Greek phrase is “should become out of the middle.” This means that the Restrainer moves Himself out of the way, stepping aside, getting out from in between. To be taken out of the way certainly does *not* mean to be entirely absent. It simply means to stop His activity of restraining. “As a member of the Godhead, the Spirit is omnipresent, has always been in the world, and He certainly will continue to be present during the Great Tribulation. But at Pentecost He assumed a special relationship to the church as to indweller (cf. John 14:16-17). After the completion of His work in the church, He will resume the relation to mankind that He had before Pentecost.” [Hiebert, 339]

Scripture affirms that each believer during the church age is indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9-11; 1 Cor 3:16; 2 Tim 1:14; Jas 4:5). This indwelling ministry requires that the Spirit be present and actively working at every place and time during which believers are present. The Holy Spirit carries on the active ministry of convicting the world and restraining sin (John 16:7-12; 1 John 4:3-4). As long as the church is present in this world, the Spirit must continue that ministry. It would be impossible for this restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit to cease while the indwelt church is still present on the earth. Therefore, the church must be removed from the world before the Spirit’s restraining ministry can cease, after which the man of lawlessness can be revealed. This conclusion confirms the sequential relationship between the Rapture and the Day of the Lord which Paul had taught the Thessalonians.

2 Thess 2:8 – 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;

As noted above, “**that lawless one**” can only appear on the stage of human history after the Restrainer has ceased His restraining ministry in the world, which implies that the Rapture of the church has also already occurred.

The last part of this verse skips over his career during the Tribulation in order to explain his final destiny. Upon His coming in judgment and glory, the Lord Jesus will “**slay**” (*anaireō*) him, using a word which literally means to take away, to take his life, or put to death. There is no scene of violent conflict or struggle here, but the picture is of Jesus simply blowing out a candle flame. One puff and the life of the lawless one is gone. This will immediately “**bring to an end**” (*katargeō*) the life and influence of the lawless one, rendering it completely inoperative and powerless.

All of this will be accomplished at the “**appearance**” (*epiphaneia*) – the glorious and powerful manifestation – of the “**coming**” (*parousia*) of the Lord – His arrival and physical presence upon the earth at the end of the Tribulation.

2 Thess 2:9 – that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders,

Now Paul will return to describing some of the activities of the man of lawlessness during the Tribulation period. First, he will explain the horrendous spirit which will energize him. After he is revealed, the lawless one will function according to “**the activity of Satan.**” The Greek word for “**activity**” is *energeia*, from which we get our English word energy. “The man of lawlessness is not Satan himself, but he will operate in the power of Satan, the instigator and energizer of the evil that is already aggressively at work in the world (v. 7). The noun ‘work’ (*energeian*), used only by Paul in the New Testament, denotes the inward operation of some supernatural power. Elsewhere used of God, only here does Paul use it of Satan. Superhuman power will characterize the career of the

lawless one.” [Hiebert, 342]

The lawless one will demonstrate those superhuman capabilities through **“power and signs and false wonders.”** The word **“power”** (*dunamis*), points to the strength or ability that is employed to produce the signs and wonders, and it is limited to the ability that Satan is capable of exercising. He possesses a degree of power, but he is a finite being whose power is limited. The **“signs”** (*sēmeion*) consist of any type of remarkable, extraordinary, or persuasive phenomena. These may be unusual occurrences or events which the lawless one will take credit for producing. **“Wonders”** (*teras*) are things that cause people to marvel or be astonished, and Paul qualified the term using the word **“false”** (*pseudos*). This word implies that a degree of deception is being used in order to lie, delude, mislead, beguile or ensnare others.

2 Thess 2:10 – 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.

Continuing the previous sentence, here Paul concluded his description of the lawless one’s activities by calling them **“the deception of wickedness.”** **“Deception”** (*apatē*) involves the deliberate attempt to fool, trick, or delude someone into believing that something false is actually true. The lawless one will employ **“wickedness”** (*adikia*), literally unrighteousness, to entice people by capitalizing on their own unrighteous thoughts and desires. Notice that the ones who are fooled into believing the lawless one are those who **“perish”** (*apollumi*). They are the unbelieving, ungodly, Christ-rejecting masses who are destined for destruction (1 Thess 5:3).

At the end of this verse Paul explained the reason why those people will perish. It will be because they refused to **“receive”** (*dechomai*) God’s provision for salvation. This word pictures the deliberate act of taking into one’s hands, holding tightly, or welcoming something, and it functions

here as a synonym for saving faith. None of those individuals would perish if they would only accept Christ's provision of salvation for them, but instead of receiving that gift they will choose to reject it. "Their fate is the just and deserved punishment for their deliberate rejection of the divine offer of salvation....God is not a monster who has pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 33:11), for He desires and has provided for their salvation (1 Tim 2:4-6). Having no love for the truth, they remained ignorant of the magnitude of the gift being offered them. They displayed a criminal indifference toward their eternal welfare, recognizing neither their danger nor the way of escape." [Hiebert, 343]

Salvation comes through receiving and "**loving**" or committing oneself to the "**truth**" regarding what Christ accomplished on the cross where He paid the price to reconcile sinners to a holy God. Although Paul focused here on the ungodly who will be deceived and perish, Scripture tells us that millions of others will be "**saved**" during the Tribulation period. The gospel will be widely circulated, especially through the efforts of 144,000 Jewish evangelists who will be commissioned and protected by God for this task (Rev 7:1-8). As a result of their ministry "a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues" will receive God's provision of salvation during the Tribulation period (Rev 7:9-17). Despite its horrific circumstances, the Day of the Lord will also be a time of effective evangelism, although the cost of following Jesus will never have been greater and many will be martyred for their faith.

2 Thess 2:11 – For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false,

"**For this reason**" refers to the cause for the action God will take. It is a result of their rejection of the truth of salvation in Christ. Since the ungodly choose to believe what is

“false” (*pseudos*) rather than the truth, God will allow them to have what they desire (cf. 2:9). “Since they deliberately chose falsehood in defiance of the truth of God, God subjects them to the power of the error they chose.... Their willful rejection of the truth had resulted in the love of evil; evil had become their good. A moral perversion of character had taken place. He who will not accept and obey the truth will inevitably find his delight in unrighteousness.” [Hiebert, 344-345]

2 Thess 2:12 – in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

The individuals addressed in this verse are the same as those in the previous two verses, who **“did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.”** This refers to the ungodly, Christ-rejecting world during the Tribulation period. The consequence of their rejection of the truth is that they will be **“judged”** (*krinō*), with the outcome of that judgment being their condemnation.

God is using the very evil that people (and even Satan) do for the working out of his purpose. They think that they are acting in defiance of him, but in the end they find that those very acts in which they expressed their defiance were the vehicle of their punishment. Paul has the same truth in other places. For example, he tells us that God gave certain sinners “over to shameful lusts” (Rom. 1:26). They thought that they were enjoying their sinful pleasures, but it turned out that they were receiving “in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.” The same truth is found in other parts of the Bible also. God is sovereign. No forces of evil, not Satan himself nor his Man of Lawlessness, can resist God’s might. He chooses people’s sin as the way in which he works out their punishment. [Morris, 235]

There is a “truth which can save” that God has made publicly available to all, but the majority of people throughout history have chosen to ignore it, not to believe it, and therefore to miss the way of escape from ultimate judgment. Instead they **“take pleasure”** in what is false rather than

receiving the truth.

Conclusions regarding the timing of these events

The Thessalonians had been taught that Christ could come for them at any moment, and that they were to live holy lives in the expectation of being rescued from the time of judgment and wrath which is coming upon a Christ-rejecting world. At the conclusion of this section of Paul's second letter, it seems appropriate to consider whether these end time events are consistent with each other and with the reactions of his readers that are noted throughout this correspondence.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 the Thessalonian believers are pictured as waiting for the return of Christ. The clear implication is that they had a hope of His imminent return. If they had been taught that the Great Tribulation, in whole or in part, must first run its course, it is difficult to see how they could be described as expectantly awaiting Christ's return. Then they should rather have been described as bracing themselves for the Great Tribulation and the painful events connected with it.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul assured his converts that those believers who had died would share equally with the living in the rapture. This was his answer to their grief at the supposed loss of those who had died. But if they had been taught that the church must go through the Great Tribulation, the logical reaction for them would have been to rejoice that these loved ones had escaped that great period of suffering they felt was about to occur.

...

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 appeals for appropriate conduct on the part of the readers in view of the coming 'day of the Lord.' If it is recognized that this term denotes a prophetic period that begins with the rapture and includes the return in glory, the passage clearly offers no proof that the church must pass through the Great Tribulation, in whole or in part. The exhortation is made in view of the prophetic prospects as a whole. The entire paragraph appeals to the readers to live a godly life, not because they must be prepared to face the prospect of enduring the Great Tribulation, but because God's purpose for them is not wrath but salvation.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 the readers are commended for their growing faith and love and are assured that because of their praiseworthy attitude amid present persecution, they will be given 'rest' while their persecutors will certainly be recompensed with severe punishment. But if the church must pass through the Great Tribulation, then Paul should have warned them that still more intense suffering lay ahead.

[In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12] Paul assured them that the prophetic Day of the Lord could not yet be running its course since two specific events had to be fulfilled. Paul's description of events during that prophetic period demonstrated that the predicted Day of the Lord was still future. The view that they were already in that day was inconsistent with the hope of their 'being gathered to him' at the rapture (v. 1), the hope so clearly set before them in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. [Hiebert, 218-219]

To that last paragraph we should add that, if the church must pass through the Great Tribulation, the logical reaction for them would have been to rejoice that the Day of the Lord had finally arrived and that they were enduring their final push before the glory of heaven. Instead, they were shaken from their composure and disturbed at the news that the day of the Lord was in progress. That reaction would make no sense if they believed that the church was to endure the judgment and wrath of the Tribulation period. However, their reaction makes perfect sense if they had been taught that the Rapture will occur first, with the removal of church-age saints from earth before the time of judgment and wrath begins.

Summary

Paul had correctly instructed the Thessalonians that Christ could come for them at any moment, and that they were to live holy lives in anticipation of their rescue from the time of judgment and wrath which is coming upon a Christ-rejecting world. This is a truth that believers everywhere must hold tightly, especially in the face of false claims to the contrary. The Day of the Lord cannot begin until after the Rapture of

the church. That future Great Tribulation will see the horrific activities of the man of lawlessness who will be empowered by Satan, but the Holy Spirit is restraining or holding back that event until the appointed time.

Observation from the text	Requirement met by the Holy Spirit
1. The restrainer is referred to using both the neuter and masculine genders	The restrainer must be a single person referred to using both genders in Scripture (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14)
2. The restrainer has been actively restraining throughout human history	The restrainer must have continuity of existence or eternality (Heb 9:14)
3. The restrainer has authority to dictate, control, and direct events in human history	The restrainer must have the ability to sovereignly bring events to pass (Acts 8:29; 11:12; 13:2; 16:6-7; 1 Cor 12:11)
4. The restrainer has power to hold back mighty spiritual forces	The restrainer must be omnipotent (Job 33:4; Rom 15:13, 19)
5. The restrainer holds back lawlessness everywhere at once on a global scale	The restrainer must be omnipresent and omniscient (Ps 139:7-8; 1 Cor 2:10-11)
6. The restrainer upholds holiness in restraining the spirit of lawlessness	The restrainer must be absolutely holy (Ps 143:10; Isa 63:10; Rom 1:4)

Praying for Believers’ Steadfastness

(2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5)

Paul had just finished discussing the destiny of the ungodly, “those who perish because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved” (2:10-12). Now in this section Paul will begin with a direct contrast. The followers of Christ are quite unlike the followers of the man of lawlessness.

2 Thess 2:13 – But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

The first two verses of this section have been described as a systematic theology in miniature, because they contain so many key elements of God’s provision for salvation. Paul began with “**But**” to indicate the contrast between his previous discussion of “**them**” (third person plural) versus “**you**” (second person plural). In this verse he will repeat the same idea as in 1:3 to convey his personal obligation (“**should**,” *opheilō*) to render thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers. Again he addressed them as his beloved “**brethren**,” but here he added that they are also “**beloved by the Lord**” (1 Thess 1:4). God is eternal and He set His love on them from eternity past.

Not only has God set His love upon them, but He has “**chosen**” them. Here Paul used the Greek word *haireomai* which carries the thought of choosing something to belong to oneself. This communicates the idea of God’s eternal purpose of adoption – of taking them to become His own children (cf. Deut 7:7-8; 10:15 in the Septuagint). “God’s choice was based, not on their love for Him or any merit on their part, but because of His love for them.” [Hiebert, 350] Paul explained that this process has been in motion “**from the beginning**,” at the time of God’s decree in eternity past. Other equivalent expressions used by Paul include “before the ages” (1 Cor 2:7), “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4), “from the ages” (Eph 3:9), and “before eternal times” (2 Tim 1:9; Tit 1:2).

The outcome of God’s loving and choosing is the “**salvation**” or deliverance of His children from sin and from the righteous wrath of God. This entire process continues through the “**sanctification**” of His children, which is the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit to set believers apart for God’s use and to empower them to live in a way that pleases Him. What has been mentioned up to this point is the work of God in the life of His children, and at the end of this verse Paul mentioned the believers’ appropriate response to all that God has done for them. This consists of “**faith in the truth**.” Faith is the conscious acknowledgment that all of this is from God. It is not a work the believer does in order to merit salvation. Faith does not rely on any human effort, but it is simply the passive reception of a gift – the gift of all that God has accomplished for the one who believes.

2 Thess 2:14 – It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here Paul will say that **“It was for this”** – for all of the preceding blessings – that God **“called”** them. The Greek word *kaleō* points to the important doctrine of God’s irresistible, effective call to His chosen ones which results in their salvation. The method God uses to accomplish His call is through the message of the **“gospel,”** which consists of the true facts in which believers place their faith and trust (2:13). “Paul well knew that the faithful preaching of the gospel was God’s means of realizing in time what He had planned in eternity.” [Hiebert, 352] The ultimate outcome of the process of salvation occurs as they **“gain the glory,”** which speaks of the future glorification of the believer (John 17:22; Rom 8:17).

These two verses present theological truths similar to those listed in the “Golden Chain of Redemption” (Rom 8:29-30). Here in the space of two brief verses Paul displayed the following doctrinal elements:

- Foreknown or “fore-loved” by God
- Election to salvation
- Effectual calling through the gospel
- Faith in the truth
- Sanctification by the Holy Spirit
- Ultimate glorification of the believer

Paul has been reminding the Thessalonians that all of these blessings are theirs because of God’s initiative on their behalf. The situation of these believers is quite different from that of the followers of the lawless one described in the previous section.

2 Thess 2:15 – So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.

With the words “**So then**,” Paul shares the final part of his request (2:1). In addition to asking that they “not be quickly shaken” from their composure, “disturbed,” or “deceived,” here Paul will tell them to “**stand firm**” (*stēkō*), to take their stand firmly on the truths they have been taught (1 Thess 3:8). One scholar has said, “Therefore – since believers were included in the pre-temporal purpose of God and are guaranteed ultimately the glory of God, and since believers cannot be overcome by Satan or his Man of Sin – therefore, stand fast in the midst of opposition from the enemies of Christ and in the face of uncertainty of the time of the return of Christ.”

[Ryrie, 117]

Paul also added a second word picture, saying that they should “**hold**” (*krateō*) to the traditions they were taught. That word means to lay hold of, to get possession of, or to become the master over something. He desired that the Thessalonians learn and study the truths they had been taught to such an extent that those truths become an integral part of their thinking and their outlook. One analogy that may illustrate Paul’s desire is that of studying to earn a Master’s or Doctorate degree in a particular area of knowledge, which may require years of intensive study and scholarship. Believers are to become the **master** of these truths so that they will not be shaken from them. The “**traditions**” (*paradosis*) are the truths faithfully handed down from one person to another. The traditions or opinions of men are valuable only to the extent that they confirm the intended meaning of the Word of God. At the end of this verse Paul mentioned that these traditions may have been delivered to them “**by word of mouth**” or “**by letter from us**.” The first phrase referred to the in-person teaching that was given when Paul and his missionary team had been with them (2:5), and the second phrase referred to the authentic letter Paul had sent to them earlier (cf. 3:17).

2 Thess 2:16 – Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace,

Just as he did in his first letter, Paul used the words “**Now may**” to mark the beginning of his prayer for the Thessalonians (1 Thess 3:11; 5:23). He will address his petition to “**our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father.**” This is a clear statement of the co-equal deity of Jesus Christ and God the Father. Before sharing his actual prayer request, Paul will mention several characteristics of God which form the foundation for the answer to his petition.

First, God “**loved us,**” and as he had mentioned above, God’s eternal love and choice were the starting points for the believers’ relationship with Him. God’s love was especially made known in the redemption that Christ purchased on the cross. Second, God “**gave,**” which shows that God’s kind of love is a love in action – especially in self-sacrificing action. “For God so **loved** the world, that He **gave** His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God’s giving flows out of His grace and mercy toward His creation.

Paul then mentioned two things that God gives to His children. The first is “**eternal comfort,**” where the word “**eternal**” (*aiōnios*) means having no beginning and no end. Just as the ungodly will have “eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord” (1:9), God’s children will have “eternal comfort.” This implies an ever-present source of comfort during affliction in this life, as well as everlasting encouragement, support, gladness, and cheer in the life to come. As one commentator explained, “The joys of religion are not like other joys. They soon fade away - they always terminate at death - they cease when trouble comes, when sickness invades the frame, when wealth or friends depart, when disappointment lowers, when the senses by age refuse to minister

as they once did to our pleasures. The comforts of religion depend upon no such contingencies. They live through all these changes - attend us in sickness, poverty, bereavement, losses, and age; they are with us in death, and they are perpetual and unchanging beyond the grave.” [Barnes, 93]

The second gift Paul mentioned is “**good hope**,” which is the expectation and certainty of future good. “The gift of ‘good hope’ is likewise a present possession, but it looks forward to the blessings connected with Christ’s return. The hope is well founded because it is based on the sure promises of God. This hope, an essential feature of a well rounded Christian life (1 Thess 1:10), is in its very nature and effect good, beneficial in its impact. It cheers and sustains the believer who cherishes it.” [Hiebert, 356]

2 Thess 2:17 – comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.

Paul will now request that the Lord would “**comfort and strengthen your hearts**.” To “**comfort**” (*parakaleō*) literally means to “call alongside” to provide help, support, or exhortation. To “**strengthen**” (*stērizō*) is to set firmly, establish, or confirm. Evidently this had been and will continue to be a key factor in assisting the Thessalonians with their spiritual growth. In his first letter Paul used the same terms to say that he sent Timothy to them in order to “*strengthen and encourage*” their faith (1 Thess 3:2). He had also prayed that God would *establish* their hearts in holiness (1 Thess 3:13). Paul made a similar request in this verse, where he desired that God would establish them “**in every good work and word**.” This phrase is literally “every work and word of good” which reflected Paul’s desire that they demonstrate holiness in all of their words and deeds.

The comfort and stability that Paul prayed for them would be especially meaningful in light of the disturbance or panic that had ensued from the forged letter and false teaching they

recently encountered. Paul desired comfort and strength for their hearts, the inner core of their being. This was something they desperately needed considering their present circumstances.

2 Thess 3:1 – Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you;

“**Finally**” (*loipos*) means “as for what remains” (cf. 1 Thess 4:1). Paul will continue with the rest of what he desired to say to the Thessalonians. He again addressed them as “**brethren**” in Christ. As he did in 1 Thess 5:25 Paul would ask that the Thessalonians also pray for him and his missionary companions.

Here in the first part of his request Paul did not solicit prayer for himself, but his primary concern was for the spread of the gospel, which he referred to as “**the word of the Lord.**” He asked them to pray for two things: first, that it would “**spread rapidly,**” which literally means to “run” or have swift progress throughout the world. This idea was found in the Old Testament, where God “sends forth His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly” (Ps 147:15). Second, he wanted prayer for the gospel to “**be glorified,**” that it will be honored and have its importance and power acknowledged. As Paul was thinking of the Thessalonians, he recalled how rapidly the gospel spread among them and how quickly it was accepted and acknowledged as life-changing (1 Thess 1:5-8). He would now ask them to pray that wherever it goes, the gospel would spread in a similar manner as it had among them.

2 Thess 3:2 – and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.

Paul then would ask for prayer for his own needs in ministry. At the time Paul was writing this second letter to the Thessalonians he had been ministering in the Greek city of Corinth. He would ultimately spend eighteen months there, but Corinth was an extremely challenging environment for Christian ministry. It was the commercial crossroads between Asia and Europe, and it had a reputation among all the ancient cities for its riches, its luxury, and its morally decadent lifestyle. The loose morals that often characterized a seaport with a transient population gave Corinth a reputation for wickedness far beyond the other great cities of the day. At one point in his ministry, the unbelieving Jews seized Paul and hauled him before the Roman proconsul (Acts 18:12-17). The charges were dismissed, but the opposition to Paul's ministry continued to be severe.

Paul asked for prayer that they “**will be rescued**” (*rhuo-mai*), which is the same word he had used to depict Jesus' rescue of believers from the coming righteous judgment and wrath of the Day of the Lord (1 Thess 1:10). This word has the idea of pulling or dragging something out of harm's way, and Paul desired to be rescued or delivered from the wrath of his enemies in Corinth. He described these opponents as “**perverse and wicked men**,” using strong terms that describe the unrighteous and evil character of his persecutors.

At the end of this verse Paul added that “**not all have faith**.” This sentiment seems to be his way of saying that not everyone has received the gospel like the Thessalonians had received it. In the last verse he had asked for prayer that the gospel would spread and be glorified just as it had in Thessalonica, but here he acknowledged that this is not the case everywhere. As one commentator explained, “He recollected the readiness with which the Thessalonians had embraced the gospel, and the firmness with which they held it, and seems to suppose that they would imagine the same thing must be found true everywhere. But he says all people have not the

same faith; all were not prepared cordially and fully to embrace the gospel. There were unreasonable and wicked people whom he had encountered, from whom he prayed that he might be delivered.” [Barnes, 97] Paul would like to see more places where the people receive the word of the Lord as the Thessalonians did.

2 Thess 3:3 – But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

After Paul mentioned that “not all have faith,” he immediately thought of One who is always and completely faithful. “**But**” in direct contrast to those without faith, the “**Lord is faithful.**”

We often have occasion to know, to our sorrow, that “all men have not faith.” We witness their infidelity. We see how they turn away from the truth. We see many who once gave some evidence that they had faith, abandon it all; and we see many in the church who seem to have no true faith, and who refuse to lend their aid in promoting the cause of religion. In such circumstances, the heart is disposed to despond, and to ask whether religion can be advanced in the midst of so much indifference and opposition? At such times, how consoling is it to be able to turn, as Paul did, to one who is faithful; who never fails us; and who will certainly accomplish his benevolent purposes. Men may be faithless and false, but God never is. They may refuse to embrace the gospel, and set themselves against it, but God will not abandon His great purposes. [Barnes, 98]

Using the same word as in 2:17 Paul declared that God Himself will be faithful to “**strengthen**” (*stērizō*) or firmly establish believers, even in the face of severe opposition. Paul then added that God is also able to “**protect**” (*phulassō*), which carries the idea of keeping watch over something for the purpose of guarding and preserving it. If the faithful God is keeping watch and protecting believers, then nothing will touch them that is not permitted by Him to carry His purposes forward. God will not establish or strengthen them and then leave them alone. He will continue to guard and protect

them after having established them.

The Greek text literally says that God “will guard from the evil,” leaving the nature of the evil unspecified. Most modern Bible translations view “the evil” as masculine in gender, rendering it as “the evil one.” This seems likely since the personal “evil one” was mentioned in the previous context (2:9). The evil one and all of his followers are always opposed to “every good work and word” (2:17).

2 Thess 3:4 – We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command.

After asking for prayer from the Thessalonians and declaring his confidence in the faithfulness of God, Paul will add that he is also persuaded that the Lord will work in their lives so they will obey and pursue what is right and true. When he said “**We have confidence**” (*peithō*) he used a verb which means persuasion, assurance, or a state of trust. This was expressed using the perfect tense which has the idea that they became persuaded in the past, but that persuasion is still with them now. Paul’s confidence was not in the Thessalonians, but in the Lord and His faithfulness on their behalf. As one commentator explains, “Their confidence is not in the reliability of human nature, but rather in the Lord who will work this willingness in them to obey voluntarily the commands laid upon them.” [Hiebert, 365]

His confidence is that they “**are doing and will continue to do**,” repeating both the present and future tenses of the verb *poieō*, with the thought of acting rightly or doing well both now and in the future. The object of their obedience is “**what we command**” (*paraggellō*), which is a word that Paul had used in his first letter where he said, “For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus” (1 Thess 4:2), and that they were to “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business

and work with your hands, just as we commanded you” (1 Thess 4:11). Here Paul seems to be preparing the Thessalonians for what he is about to command regarding the unruly members of the church. One scholar has said, “The things being commanded have reference not merely to the charge to pray for them (vv.1-2) but specifically to the command to discipline the disorderly (vv. 6-15), which the writers already have in view. This forward look of the verb here is verified by the repetition of the very term in verses 6, 10, and 12.” [Hiebert, 365] This entire section may have been intended as a gentle way of transitioning into his exhortation concerning the existing problem in their fellowship, which will be the topic of the upcoming section.

2 Thess 3:5 – May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

Paul began this verse with “**Now may**,” just as he did in 2:16, to mark the continuation of his prayer that God would accomplish two things for the Thessalonians. He asked that the Lord would “**direct your hearts**” (*kateuthunō*) which is the same word he had used in his first letter when he said, “Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you” (1 Thess 3:11). As it did there, here it means to make straight or to lay out a smooth and direct route, while removing any obstacles or hindrances to their progress. Paul has encouraged them to grow in their love throughout his letters to the Thessalonians, and here he asked that there would be no hindrances to their experience of the “**love of God.**” Paul desired that their hearts would be directed into the unselfish, sacrificial love that is characteristic of God Himself. This would provide increasing appreciation for God’s own love for them, as well as the ability to express this kind of love to others (1 Thess 1:3; 3:6, 12; 5:8, 13; 2 Thess 1:3).

Paul had also encouraged them to be unwavering in their “**steadfastness**,” so here he asked that there would be no hindrances to their experience of the steadfastness that is characteristic of Christ. He had used this Greek word *hupomonē* in both of his letters (1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:4), which literally means “to abide under” and has been translated as perseverance, endurance, and steadfastness especially under the pressure of affliction. The Lord Jesus Christ provided the ultimate example of steadfastness as He endured the cross, despising its shame, for the joy that was set before him. The Thessalonians were in need of this kind of steadfastness in order to endure their circumstances in a godly manner.

Summary

In this section of his letter Paul has reaffirmed his thankfulness to God for their reception of the gospel which had changed their lives in such significant ways. He encouraged them to be firmly established in the truths that they were taught, so that they would not be quickly shaken by false teaching. He also prayed that God would give them the strength and ability to continue every good work He had planned for them. As they also prayed for Paul and his companions, they would be comforted in the faithfulness of God by seeing their prayers answered. Paul also asked God to strengthen them so that they would have the courage to carry out the commands given to them by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the next section of this letter Paul will give them exactly this type of command in order to handle a persistent problem in the church at Thessalonica.

Dealing with the Unruly in the Church

(2 Thessalonians 3:6-18)

In the final part of this letter Paul will again deal with an issue that had occurred in the church at Thessalonica. In these letters we can trace the sequence of events regarding the unruly within their assembly. First, when the apostle was with them he noticed that there were certain individuals who began neglecting their livelihood, and he gave orders that if they would not work, they should not eat (2 Thess 3:10). Then, after his arrival in Corinth, Paul heard that such people were still refusing to support themselves, and he felt compelled in his first epistle to command them to work with their own hands (1 Thess 4:11-12). In that letter he also told the church to admonish the unruly (1 Thess 5:14). Finally, even after the Thessalonians had received the instructions in his first letter, Paul continued to hear that those individuals still were not following his instructions. This is what will lead him to deal strongly with the issue in this second epistle.

2 Thess 3:6 – Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.

This verse begins with “**Now**” (*de*) which introduces the new subject that Paul will discuss with the Thessalonians. Here he again addressed them as “**brethren**” but he will

“command” (*paraggellō*) them with authority, **“in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** This is similar to the way he addressed them in his first letter when he said, “For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus” (1 Thess 4:2). In this section Paul will put to the test his confidence that the Thessalonians “will continue to do what we command” (3:4).

Here Paul will address the church in Thessalonica as a whole. In his first letter Paul had told them to “admonish the unruly” (1 Thess 5:14), but here Paul tells them to **“keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life.”** Since the church’s earlier admonitions were ignored, Paul commands them to take the more serious step of separating from the unruly believers. The root word for **“keep away”** (*stellō*) literally meant “to furl the sails” and by implication, to steer clear of, to move oneself away from, or to withdraw oneself from something. The present tense means “to continually keep away.” Here Paul commanded them to discontinue their fellowship and support of the unruly brethren.

The identification of this problem depends on the meaning of the word translated **“unruly”** (*ataktōs*). Some Bible translations have rendered the meaning as “idleness” (e.g., ESV, NIV, CSB, RSV), but if that is the meaning Paul intended, then he would have used a different Greek word (*argos*) which means idle, lazy, or shunning the labor which one ought to perform. One of the challenges in arriving at the intended meaning for this term involves the limited number of occurrences of this word group in the New Testament. The adverb *ataktōs* is used here and in 3:11, the verb *atakteō* is used in 3:7, and the adjective *ataktos* appears in 1 Thess 5:14. These provide few biblical examples for comparison. The word itself consists of the negative particle (*a-*) and a derivative of *tassō*, meaning to arrange in an orderly manner, so the general definition is “to set oneself outside the prescribed order.” This word was used to describe soldiers marching out of

order or breaking ranks. The idea of this word is that of deliberate disorderliness, insubordination, or unruliness.

Paul described a key characteristic of their unruliness when he said that they are living “**not according to the tradition which you received from us.**” By using the same word, “**tradition**” (*paradosis*), Paul links this verse with what he said in 2:15 where he told them to “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.” This refers to all of Paul’s instructions given personally or in his letters.

Withdrawing fellowship and support from the unruly was not a formal sentence of excommunication, which may have been appropriate in more extreme cases (cf. 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20). The principle Paul shared might be used to handle similar situations within a local church, but here Paul was dealing with a specific situation in which a few individuals were expecting fellow-believers to support them. In the following verses Paul will share the reasons for his command to the church.

2 Thess 3:7 – For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you,

“**For**” (*gar*) indicates that Paul will give further explanation for what he had just said. This term is a marker that he will use again in 3:10 and 3:11 as he proceeds to explain the sequence of events that led up to his more severe command in the previous verse. First, Paul and his companions had set an example for them while they were with them. The believers themselves “**know**” (*eidō*) this because they were present as eyewitnesses of Paul’s manner of life while he was among them. He used the word “**ought**” (*dei*) which communicates a binding necessity or obligation. Paul had already mentioned that they were obligated to “**follow**” (*mimeomai*) or mimic the example of Paul’s life (1 Thess 1:6; 2:7-12; 2 Thess 2:15).

The present tense means that they were to be constantly imitating Paul, and he will now begin to identify several aspects of his lifestyle that they should be emulating.

Paul declared that he and his companions did not act in an **“undisciplined manner”** (*atakteō*). He was saying that they never demonstrated insubordination or unruliness in their manner of living. Paul and his missionary team had acted “according to the tradition,” in direct contrast to the unruly ones who were acting “not according to the tradition” (3:6).

2 Thess 3:8 – 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 this verse Paul used the expression **“eat anyone’s bread,”** which is apparently a Jewish idiom for earning a living by working with one’s hands. Paul’s example which they were to imitate included this aspect of not eating anyone’s bread without paying for it. Here he declared that the missionary team never received their meals and lodging as compensation for their ministry services, but instead they supported themselves while they were in Thessalonica. “Paul does not mean that he had never accepted a hospitable invitation, but that he had not depended on other people for his means of livelihood.” [Morris, 253] But Paul is making a connection between his example of earning a living and the fact that those who were acting in an unruly manner were doing exactly the opposite.

It was Paul’s common practice to earn his living at the same time that he was conducting his missionary work. Here he admitted that this caused a great deal of **“labor”** (*kopos*) and **“hardship”** (*mochthos*), but this was the practice he would follow throughout his ministry. In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul had used both of these words to describe

his typical work / ministry pattern (1 Thess 2:9). Even while engaged in full-time ministry, Paul “**kept working night and day**” in order to earn a living at his occupation so that he could pay his own way. The present tense of the verb shows that he continually worked during the entire time he was among them. They worked during normal business hours (day) as well as beyond normal working hours (night). His overriding reason was so that they would “**not be a burden to any of you.**” Paul did not want his material needs to weigh heavily upon anyone in the church at Thessalonica so as to become a distraction from spiritual things.

2 Thess 3:9 – not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example.

Here Paul presented another aspect of his example to the Thessalonians which involved waiving or declining his legitimate apostolic right to the support of the churches. In Paul’s later letter to the Corinthians he would give a more detailed explanation of this practice (1 Cor 9:1-18). But in this verse he simply says that refusing to gain his livelihood from the church was “**not because we do not have the right to this.**” The word “**right**” (*exousia*) means the power of authority or of ruling leadership. Support from the church was the prerogative of such a position of authority in the Lord. It is significant that Paul would mention this, because it implied that the unruly may have been attempting to appropriate that right for themselves. Paul had a legitimate right to the support of the churches, but the unruly ones had no such claim to the rights which were due a designated church leader.

To begin the last half of the verse Paul used two connecting terms. “**But**” (*alla*) is a strong word of contrast, and *hina* begins a purpose clause: “**in order that.**” His ultimate purpose or goal for waiving his rights was so that he could “**offer**” (*didōmi*, literally “give or present”) himself as a

“**model**” (*tupos*) or example that they would “**follow**” (*mimeomai*), mimic, or imitate. The present tense shows that Paul intended them to constantly mimic or imitate his example. In these verses it is clear that Paul expected the Thessalonians to imitate his practice of working to support himself.

2 Thess 3:10 – For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.

“**For**” (*gar*) marks his explanation for the next event that led up to the command in 3:6, and this was that Paul had already instructed them about this issue when he was with them. The phrase “**we used to give this order**” is a translation of the single Greek word *paragellō* (“command”). Paul used the same verb in his first letter where he said, “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you” (1 Thess 4:11). Paul had used the phrase “**if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat,**” which was a common Jewish proverb based on Genesis 3:19. When he was with them Paul had taught them and had also written to them that they were to earn their own living in order to provide for their basic needs, so he expected them to fully comply with those explicit instructions.

2 Thess 3:11 – For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.

“**For**” (*gar*) is again used to introduce the next event in the sequence, and this came to Paul from a recent report that specific brothers were continuing to ignore Paul’s example and to disobey his previous instructions. When he said “**we hear**” he used the present tense which means “we are right now hearing.” The news came to Paul that some of the Thessalonians were, literally, “**walking unruly**” (*ataktōs*), which

indicates that a few believers were continuing to be insubordinate and out of step with the traditions they had been taught.

We have seen that one characteristic of the unruly brethren was that they were expecting to have their basic needs met through the support of the local church. Now in the last part of this verse Paul will describe another key aspect of their behavior. He said they were “**doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.**” In the Greek text this phrase consists of four words that could be translated literally as “working nothing but working around” (*mēden ergazomenous alla periergazomenous*). Paul used this play on words to enhance the impact of this description. The Greek verb *ergazomenous* is the same term he used in 3:8 to describe how he kept working night and day. By contrast, *periergazomenous* means to bustle about uselessly, and it was used of a person who would meddle in the affairs of others, supposedly in a somewhat official capacity. These unruly brothers were certainly not inactive, lethargic, or idle loafers. They were busily involved in other people’s affairs. This description lends support to the idea that the unruly brethren may have been assuming a self-appointed leadership role and claiming the right of church support as a result.

2 Thess 3:12 – Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

Here Paul directly addressed the unruly brethren. He will “**command**” (*paraggellō*) and “**exhort**” (*parakaleō*) them, by the direct authority of “**the Lord Jesus Christ,**” to do what they should have been doing all along. They are “**to work in quiet fashion,**” and the word “**quiet**” (*hēsuchia*) describes the life of someone who stays at home earning his own livelihood without meddling officiously in the affairs of others. Paul commanded that they “**eat their own bread,**”

which again means that they are to earn their own living by working to support themselves. So Paul is ordering the insubordinate believers to stop their meddlesome activities and return to their normal business.

2 Thess 3:13 – But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.

Paul now returns to addressing the “**brethren**” in the church at large. These are the ones that he originally addressed in 3:6 when he wrote them to “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life.” Essentially here he will say, “You who are not unruly, keep doing the right things.” “**Do not grow weary**” (*ekkakeō*) is from *kakos* (“bad”), and the compound word here means that they are not to be “wearied out” or lose heart so as to give up. By contrast, they are to be “**doing good**” (*kalopoieō*), which is another compound word from *kalos* (“good”) and *poieō* (“to do or make”). The present tense emphasizes that they are to be in the habit of continually doing good. This is Paul’s way of encouraging the church at large to obey his command to them regarding the treatment of the unruly ones within their assembly.

2 Thess 3:14 – 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.

In this verse Paul will return to the meaning of his original command (3:6), giving additional details for the action the church should take. When he said “**If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter**” he is referring to “every brother who leads an unruly life” (3:6). The instruction in this letter is that all of the Thessalonians follow Paul’s example, to “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught” (2:15). They are to “work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread” (3:12). And they are to “fulfill every desire

for goodness and the work of faith with power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you” (1:11-12).

For those who are “walking unruly” (3:6), however, the church is to “**take special note**” which is a translation of the single Greek verb *sēmeiōō* that can literally mean to inscribe marks upon something. Here it is used figuratively to mean clearly distinguishing or identifying someone by their behavior. Once the disobedient person has been identified, then the members of the assembly are not to associate with him. To “**associate**” (*sunanamignumi*) pictures mixing together with something or having contact with someone. The present middle infinitive shows that they were not to be in the habit of continually associating themselves with the unruly brethren. The expected result of this limitation on their former association was described in the final clause of this verse: “**so that**” (*hina*) the unruly ones might be “**shamed**” (*entrepō*), which means “to turn about.” This verb appears in the passive voice, so it means that the unruly are made to turn and look into themselves, with the hope that they will be humbled and motivated to come back into alignment with the traditions they had been taught. Correction and restoration to fellowship are the ultimate goals for the church’s action.

2 Thess 3:15 – Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

Here Paul gave a final caution to the church about implementing his command. They are not to “**regard**” (*hēgeomai*) him as an enemy. This term can mean to declare as with official authority, but it is not Paul’s desire that the unruly ones should be permanently stigmatized or ostracized from the fellowship as hostile enemies. Instead their goal should be to “**admonish**” (*noutheteō*) him as a brother. This term means “to put into the mind” or to gently reprove, warn, and correct. The church is not to shun him in complete silence, but they are to tell him why they are withdrawing their support from

him. Notice that even the unruly one is still called a “**brother**” in Christ, so the goal should be restoration to their normal family relationship in the Lord.

Summary of Paul’s teaching in this section

What characterized the behavior of the unruly ones?

- They were brothers, that is, fellow-Christians (3:6, 15)
- They were disobedient to the instruction that Paul had given them (3:6, 14)
- They were not following Paul’s example to support themselves (3:7-10)
- They were out from under proper authority, or possibly acting on their own authority in a self-appointed role in order to claim support from the church (3:8-9)
- They were not idle or inactive, but were busy in other people’s affairs (3:11)

Why were they unruly?

Paul does not say exactly why they were unruly, but we can be sure that the Thessalonians knew the exact nature of the situation. Since Paul did not specify, then we cannot be dogmatic about the matter. It is possible that one of the following causes may account for their behavior.

Some of the Thessalonians may have had the inherent character flaw of laziness. This notion gains support from the fact that the Thessalonians were new believers, and they had not had time to be conformed to the character of Christ. However, it does not account for their active work or “busyness” in the affairs of other believers. It also does not seem to be an appropriate reason for Paul to address them as insubordinate or unruly rather than simply lazy.

The persecution they were suffering may have caused them to despair of their lives and to give up their normal activities, including their work. The fact that they were suffering

severe affliction lends support to this idea. However, while it is true that the trauma associated with serious affliction does impact one's ability to function normally, this does not seem to be a sufficient reason for Paul to address them as insubordinate or unruly. Also, rather than rebuking them for their reaction to persecution, Paul actually praised them for their response to persecution (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess 1:4).

The doctrine of the imminent Rapture of the church may have led them to conclude that they could give up their vocational activities. This is a common idea expressed by many commentators, but neither of these letters directly connects the expectation of the imminent Rapture with idleness or laziness. As one scholar explains, "There is no expressed connection between the doctrinal error and the disorderly conduct of certain members. The doctrinal error apparently did not produce the practical problem." [Hiebert, 337-338]

On their own authority they may have claimed the same right of support from the church that Paul might have claimed (2 Thess 3:9). They may have based this claim on their own self-appointed ministry activities. This idea gains support from the fact that some among them were giving prophetic utterances, which could be seen as carrying a certain degree of authority even though they may not have been part of the official leadership of the church. These people may have stopped their ordinary work in order to devote themselves to prophesying and ministering to others. The self-appointed nature of their activities placed them out from under proper authority, so Paul commanded them to stop being insubordinate and to return to work (3:12).

What is Paul's solution to the problem?

Paul's solution was simple and straightforward. First, the church must cut off support, and the unruly brothers must resume their gainful employment. In a very practical way this action would tend to resolve any problems arising from their

insubordination, meddlesomeness, and desire for church support. It is not as clear why Paul would recommend such a solution if the cause of the problem in Thessalonica involved an incorrect view of the doctrine of the imminent Rapture.

2 Thess 3:16 – Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!

In the final three verses of this chapter, Paul will share his closing wishes. Again Paul used the words “**Now may**” to mark his final prayer for the Thessalonians, and he will address his petition to “the Lord of peace Himself.” In using the word “**Lord**” Paul typically refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, and in this verse he identified Jesus Christ as the source of peace (cf. 1 Thess 5:23). In the midst of opposition, confusion, and unruliness within the church, Paul prayed that the Lord of peace would continually grant them peace in every circumstance. When he said “**The Lord be with you all**” he prayed that the presence of the Lord Himself would be especially felt as the members of the Thessalonian church work through these issues and as they seek to live in a way that will glorify their Lord.

2 Thess 3:17 – I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write.

At the close of this letter Paul took the pen in his own hand and wrote the final lines. He usually employed an amanuensis or recording secretary to legibly write the bulk of his correspondence. He wrote this greeting in his own handwriting, and with the threat of potentially spurious epistles, Paul referred to his signature as the distinctive proof that the letter is genuine (cf. 2:2). Paul’s way of writing could be easily recognized by those who knew him, and it was probably not easily counterfeited by his opponents who were not familiar with

his style of correspondence.

2 Thess 3:18 – The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Just as he had begun this letter (1:2) Paul would close by desiring “**the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ**” for them, which consists of the unmerited favor, good will, and loving-kindness of God. Nothing of significance can occur apart from the grace of God. Paul had already spoken of his desire that the Lord Himself would be present with them, and here he used his normal parting hope that God’s grace would be evident among them.

Conclusion

These two short letters from the apostle Paul to the Thessalonian believers have been of tremendous value to the church at large since the time they were written. They are intimately linked with the chronology of the early church, and for that reason alone they prove that the words of Scripture are not man-made fairy tales, as some would suggest, but they are directly tied to the actual people, places, and events of the first Christian century. Their historical accuracy provides affirmation and confidence that they are true and authoritative in every area.

The Thessalonian letters provide a very personal glimpse into the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. He wrote as a father would write to his own children, and his love and concern for them is evident throughout the epistles. Paul had seen dramatic changes in their lives as a result of God's powerful work in the new believers, and the testimony of their lives echoed throughout the region. He especially noted that their hope in the imminent return of Christ gave them the perseverance to patiently endure severe affliction. A correct understanding of prophetic truths can provide needed encouragement and hope for believers as they experience the trials of life in a fallen world.

Part of Paul's purpose for writing was to provide the church with what was essentially an affidavit or sworn statement of his defense against those who would oppose the gospel. They were saying that he did not love and care for the Thessalonians, but Paul cared so much that his separation from them was personally devastating. He was vulnerable in

sharing his emotional struggles, which allows us to identify with him in a way that might otherwise have been impossible. Paul's example of endurance and steadfastness in prayer should be imitated by all Christians.

God's will for all of His children is their sanctification – that they continually grow in spiritual maturity, which will reveal itself through their thoughts, words, and behavior – and Paul led the way by providing an example through his personal lifestyle as well as giving needed instruction for holiness of life in several key areas. He clearly explained how the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit is a crucial factor in helping each believer make steady progress toward God's goal. Not only is a life of faith important for pleasing a holy God, but it will also be evident to others, and God can use it to bring even more people into a saving relationship with Jesus.

In the area of prophetic truth, Paul provided previously unrevealed details regarding the two future comings of Christ. First, Jesus will come to call and gather church-age saints to return with Him to His Father's house – an event which is often called the Rapture of the church. After the departure of the church from the world there will be a period called the Day of the Lord or the Great Tribulation, and it will be characterized by horrendous lawlessness, deception, wickedness, and satanic activity. That time is appointed for the unbelieving world who are living in darkness, but church-age believers will have been gathered to the Lord well before it begins. Then at His second coming, Christ will descend directly to the earth to establish His messianic kingdom during which He will rule from the throne of David in Jerusalem. This is a truth that believers everywhere must hold onto and place their hope in, especially when false claims to the contrary arise. The Day of the Lord cannot begin until after the Rapture of the church.

As Paul gave thanks for the Thessalonians' faith in the midst of persecution, he reassured them that there will be justice for those who afflict others. Their faith in the midst of suffering was a plain indication that God had declared them worthy of future participation in His kingdom. Their persecutors, however, will experience a completely different future. God's justice will require that the ungodly pay the full penalty for their sins, and they will be excluded from the presence of the Lord forever.

Paul encouraged his beloved brethren to be firmly established in the truths that they had been taught, so that they would not be quickly shaken by false teaching. This is something that all believers should do, no matter when or where they are living. Paul also provided practical instructions for handling specific types of difficulties or issues when they arise within the local church. For example, believers are to exercise discernment when examining new ideas so that they can evaluate them by comparing them to the truths of the Word of God.

Paul encouraged the brethren to respect and appreciate the leaders who are accountable for the health and welfare of the church. They were to live in peaceful submission to the leadership of the local church, rather than behaving in an unruly fashion. As members of the family of God they were to prop up the weak and bear with the failings of others in love. Their lives should be characterized by rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving while they were keeping a firm grasp on the truths and traditions they were taught. Paul reminded them that above all they should trust in the faithfulness of God, so that God would receive all the glory for the results as believers work out their faith in their daily lives.