

INTRODUCTION AND 1 THESSALONIANS

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Table of Contents

Introduction to 1 Thessalonians	2
I. Probable partial chronology of Paul's life	2
II. Some Details of Second Missionary Journey.....	2
III. Location, Authorship, and Date of Writing	3
IV. The City of Thessalonica.....	4
V. The Thessalonian Church	5
The Text	5
I. Prescript (1:1)	5
II. Thanksgiving for Thessalonians (1:2-10)	6
III. Defense of Visit (2:1-12).....	10
IV. Further Thanksgiving for Thessalonians (2:13-16).....	13
V. Reassurance Regarding Separation (2:17 - 3:13).....	15
A. Longing during separation (2:17-20).....	15
B. Sending of Timothy (3:1-5).....	16
C. Joy over Timothy's report (3:6-10)	16
D. Prayer for Thessalonians (3:11-13)	17
VI. Exhortation and Instruction (4:1 - 5:22).....	19
A. Keeping prior instructions (4:1-2)	19
B. Sexual purity (4:3-8)	20
C. Brotherly love (4:9-12)	22
D. Second Coming (4:13 - 5:11).....	22
1. and the faithful deceased (4:13-18)	22
2. and specific times (5:1-11).....	25
E. Recognition of leaders (5:12-13)	27
F. Various duties (5:14-22).....	27
VII. Prayer for Thessalonians (5:23-24).....	30
VIII. Closing (5:25-28).....	30

Introduction to 1 Thessalonians

I. Probable partial chronology of Paul's life

conversion (Acts 9:1-7)	33/34
Damascus & Arabia (Acts 9:8-25)	33/34 - 36/37
1st Jerusalem visit (Acts 9:26-29)	36/37
Tarsus (Cilicia) (Acts 9:30)	36/37 - 43/45
Antioch (Syria) (Acts 11:25-26)	43/45
2d Jerusalem visit (famine) (Acts 11:30)	46/47
1st missionary journey (Acts 13 -14)	47/48
Galatians written	48/49
Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)	49
2d missionary journey (Acts 15:36 - 18:22)	49-51

II. Some Details of Second Missionary Journey

A. After the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 49, Paul suggested that he and Barnabas revisit the churches they had planted during their missionary journey. They disagreed over taking John called Mark (Paul did not want to take him because he had deserted them early in the first journey), so Barnabas took John/Mark and sailed to Cyprus; Paul took Silas and headed out on foot (Acts 15:36-41).

B. When they visited Lystra, a town in modern Turkey, they were joined by a young Christian named Timothy (Acts 16:1-3).

1. Paul and Barnabas had visited Lystra some two years earlier during Paul's first missionary journey, and at that time Timothy's mother, Eunice, and his grandmother Lois probably became Christians (Acts 14:8-20; 2 Tim. 1:5). When Paul returned to Lystra with Silas on his second missionary journey, Timothy was a Christian and had a good reputation among the brothers in Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:1-2). So it is not surprising that Paul wanted to take Timothy with him (Acts 16:3).

2. Timothy most likely became a Christian through the influence of his mother and the church elders in Lystra. Paul thus had a clear, albeit indirect, hand in Timothy's conversion, which along with the close working relationship they developed, led him to refer to him years later as his "true child in the faith" (1 Tim. 1:2).

C. They went from town to town in southern Galatia delivering the decision of the Jerusalem Council and strengthening the churches (Acts 16:4-5). Then the Spirit guided them to Troas by preventing them from speaking the word in the Roman province of Asia (the western part of Asia Minor) and from going into Bithynia (Acts 16:6-8). In Troas, Paul was given a vision of a man from the Roman province of Macedonia who was

calling him to come over to Macedonia to help them. They promptly sailed to Macedonia in response to that vision (Acts 16:9-11). Note that this is the first of what are known as the "we passages" in Acts (16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, 27:1-28:16) indicating that Luke, the author of Acts, is with Paul at this point.

D. They stopped at the island of Samothrace and then sailed to Neapolis in Macedonia. From there they traveled to Philippi, a leading city in the province. Paul and Silas ended up being beaten severely and thrown in prison in Philippi (Acts 16:16-40), despite the fact they were Roman citizens, which made such treatment illegal.

E. From Philippi Paul, Silas, and Timothy went to Thessalonica, about a four-day walk, if their pace was not slowed by the beating they received. They planted the church to which this letter is written. After starting that church, they were forced to flee to Berea when the Jews started a riot in the city (Acts 17:1-10).

1. It is unclear precisely how long they spent in Thessalonica. Acts 17:2 says Paul reasoned in the synagogue on three Sabbath days, but that probably refers to the time he spent specifically among the Jews, after which he preached to the Gentiles.

2. The fact Paul worked at his trade while in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:7-9), received aid from the Philippians (Phil. 4:16; perhaps more than once), and apparently appointed church leaders (1 Thess. 5:12) suggests the stay was longer than three weeks.

3. At most, Paul was in Thessalonica for a matter of months. Luke certainly does not portray his stay there as lengthy, and we know from an ancient inscription that Gallio was proconsul of Achaia from July 51 to July 52. Paul's stay in Corinth of over a year and a half (Acts 18:11, 18) ended not long after (effect of "some time" in Acts 18:18) he appeared before Gallio. He probably arrived in Corinth in early 50, came before Gallio in the late summer of 51, and left for Antioch in fall of 51. For Paul to be in Corinth in early 50 does not leave too many months for him to be in Thessalonica.

F. Paul's experience in Berea was similar to his experience in Thessalonica. His Jewish opponents from Thessalonica followed him to Berea and stirred up the crowds against him. So the brothers sent him off to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea (Acts 17:11-15).

G. Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Athens (Acts 17:15-16), and then Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:1-2). Silas went to some undisclosed place in Macedonia, and then he and Timothy rejoined Paul (perhaps Silas arrived first) who had since moved to Corinth (Acts 18:5). Paul's condition when he arrived in Corinth is reflected in 1 Cor. 2:3, "I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling."

III. Location, Authorship, and Date of Writing

A. As I said, Paul stayed in Corinth over a year and a half (Acts 18:18:11, 18), and that is where he was when Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia (Acts 18:5). The news Timothy brought to Paul is what prompted 1 Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3:6-8), meaning the letter was written from Corinth. This most likely was in A.D. 50.

B. Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians identify Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy in the salutation.

1. It is clear from comparing Paul's letters with the Book of Acts that "Silvanus" is another name for Silas. Silas was a Jewish name, and he presumably assumed the similar sounding Roman name of Silvanus. According to Acts 15:22, 32, Silas was a leader in the church and a prophet.

2. Though the letters are sent in the name of all three men, the use of the first person singular in 1 Thess 3:5 and 5:27 indicates that one of the three is the principal author. 1 Thessalonians 2:18 indicates this principal author is Paul, as does his appearing first in the salutation. See Barry Smith's [The First Letter to the Thessalonians](#).

IV. The City of Thessalonica

A. From AD 44 on, Thessalonica served as the capital of Macedonia. It was the largest and most important city in the province, being its chief port city and being situated on the Via Egnatia, the main east-west Roman road, and on the major road north along the Axios River.

B. It was a "free city," meaning that the local inhabitants had their own government and rights of citizenship. It was cosmopolitan, being inhabited by Greeks, Romans, and a significant number of Jews. In keeping with the religious pluralism of major cities in the ancient world, the inhabitants of Thessalonica worshiped a multitude of pagan deities. Jeffrey Weima states in *1-2 Thessalonians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 10:

Numismatic, inscriptional, and other archaeological evidence reveal that over twenty-five gods, heroes, and personifications of virtues were worshiped in Thessalonica . . . In these diverse sources, the specific gods mentioned most frequently include Dionysus, the gods of Egypt – especially Serapis and Isis but also Osiris, Harpocrates, and Anubis – and Cabirus, who served as the patron deity of Thessalonica. Also important in Thessalonica was the imperial cult – the worship of Roma as a personification of the Roman state and of individual emperors as gods. Other less commonly attested deities include Zeus Hypsistos (the "most high" Zeus), Hera, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite Epiteuxidia (the Aphrodite "giving success"), Demeter and her daughter (Persephone), Hermes Kerdoos (the "profitable" Hermes), Poseidon (connected with the important harbor at Thessalonica), Cybele (the Phrygian mother goddess),

Asklepios (god of healing) and his daughter (Hygieia, Health), Nike (Victory), the Dioscuri, Heracles, Tyche (Fortune), and Nemesis (Retribution). Judaism, with the likely presence of a local synagogue should also be added to this religious potpourri.

V. The Thessalonian Church

A. Acts 17:4 indicates that Paul's initial evangelistic effort in the Jewish synagogue succeeded in persuading only some Jews, but it bore fruit with a large number of "devout Greeks," meaning God-fearers, Gentiles who to varying degrees had aligned themselves with Judaism without converting. Gene Green remarks in *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002), 108 that the God-fearers "were a rather amorphous group, some of whom had abandoned their gods but others who had simply added the Jewish God to their pantheon." Acts 17:4 indicates that Paul also converted quite a few prominent women in the city.

B. In 1 Thess. 1:9, Paul refers to them as those who had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." This suggests that the large majority of the Thessalonian Christians were Gentiles who had been practicing idol worship, probably including those converted from full paganism and those God-fearers who previously had not made a break with idolatry. To the extent it suggests there were converts from full paganism, it is another indication that they spent more than three weeks evangelizing in the city.

C. The Thessalonian church was very young, and Paul and his companions had not had much time to ground them in the faith before being chased out. This, coupled with the polytheism and hostility of the larger community to the Christian message, made their situation precarious. You can understand why Paul was so thankful to receive good news about them from Timothy.

The Text

I. Prescript (1:1)

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace.

A. As I noted, the letter formally is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy, but Paul appears to be the main author (2:18, 3:5, 5:27). It is to the group of Christians in Thessalonica, the church they had planted there not many months before.

B. They are "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" in that their union with the Father is because of their union with Jesus. As the Apostle John would put it much later in 1 Jn. 2:23, *No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.*

C. Paul's greeting is for God's grace in Christ to be upon them and for them to have the peace, the harmony and fellowship with God, that results from that bestowal of grace. The additional phrase "from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" that appears in the KJV (and NKJV) is not original and is therefore omitted from nearly all modern versions.

II. Thanksgiving for Thessalonians (1:2-10)

²We always give thanks to God for all of you when making mention [of you] in our prayers, ³recalling constantly in the presence of our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and perseverance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴knowing, brothers loved by God, your election, ⁵that our gospel did not come to you in word alone but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and in much certainty, even as you know the sort of men we were among you for your sakes. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord by receiving the word in much affliction with joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷with the result that you became an example for all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has been sounded forth from you not only into Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth into every place so that we do not need to say anything [about it]. ⁹For they themselves announce about us what sort of visit we had to you, how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

A. Paul, Silas, and Timothy tell the Thessalonians that when they mention them in their prayers they always give thanks to God for all of them (1:2). They tell them that to encourage them. They want them to know that they are doing well in the faith, that they are pleasing not only the missionaries but God.

B. The reason they always give thanks to God for all of them is that they recall regularly in their prayers ("in the presence of our God and Father") the Thessalonians' work of faith, labor of love, and perseverance of hope in Jesus Christ (1:3). They are thankful because the Thessalonians demonstrated the presence of genuine faith, love, and hope. These attitudes and qualities bubbled out in actions, in their work and labor and in their perseverance in the face of persecution. As the NIV renders the clauses: your work *produced by faith*, your labor *prompted by love*, and your endurance *inspired by hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a wonderful thing to see people to whom you've preached giving themselves over to the Lord Jesus Christ, *living* like they "get it."

C. Even more fundamentally, they always give thanks for them because they know their *election*, their having been chosen by God to receive great blessings (1:4).

1. The two major views of election and predestination within Protestantism are Calvinism and Arminianism. Calvinists believe that God from eternity chose certain specific individuals to be saved and did so *unconditionally*, meaning he picked them without regard to anything in or about them. And having chosen them, he assured their salvation by determining they would believe, by calling them to faith *irresistibly*, and making it impossible for them to fall away from the faith. All those God did not choose from eternity are damned necessarily because God will not enable them to believe and it is impossible for them to do so without that enablement.

2. The Arminian understanding, which takes its name from the 16th-early 17th-century Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius, is that God from eternity chose *Christ* and in that chose all who freely enter into Christ by faith. Most people in churches rooted in the American Restoration Movement (e.g., Church of Christ) are Arminian, as are Wesleyan/Methodists, Pentecostal groups, and various Baptists.

a. If, for example, a man died and his will said that Boy Scout Troop 101 was to be taken to Disneyland on the first anniversary of his death, that person chose or elected *the troop*, the membership of which varied over time. All who were part of the troop on that date would receive the blessing, but the election was of a fluid corporate entity. God's election was of Christ, in whom many are incorporated.

b. Of course, God knows the future so he foreknows which individuals will be in Christ. Those individuals properly can be described as elect, but their election is in the Son. It is derived through their identification with Jesus. And that identification is based on their choice, their exercise of free will, which capacity God in his grace gives to fallen humans. Contrary to Calvinists, Arminians do not believe that faith in Christ is something absolutely determined by God in fulfillment of a prior unconditional choosing of individuals. God wants all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9-10; Jn. 3:17), and toward that end he has granted them the freedom to accept or reject his gracious offer of salvation.

c. This concept of corporate election is illustrated in Romans 11. There you have an elect *Israel*, a subset of physical Israel consisting of those physical descendants of Abraham who had faith in God. The election is of *Israel*, and individuals are elect only in identification and union with the group. Individuals are grafted into the elect group and removed from the elect group depending on faith. See also, Col. 1:2 with Col. 3:12 and 2 Pet. 1:1 with 2 Pet. 1:10.

3. For a more detailed study of election, see Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1970); William G. MacDonald, "The Biblical Doctrine of Election" in Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1989) 207-229; Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 78-90; Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002); Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002) 388-399; Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a*

Calvinist (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); Roger E. Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election*, rev. ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015); A. Chadwick Thornhill, *The Chosen People: Election, Paul, and Second Temple Judaism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); Jerry L. Walls, *Does God Love Everyone? The Heart of What's Wrong with Calvinism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016); Robert E. Picirilli, *Free Will Revisited* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017). For a good analysis of Calvinism in an online lecture, see Jerry Walls's [What's Wrong with Calvinism, Part 1](#).

D. The missionaries know of the Thessalonians' election, know they are genuine converts, because they know the gospel did not come to them in word alone but also with powerful effect, referring to the radical transformation of their lives, and with a deep conviction that the gospel was true, both of which were products of the Spirit (**1:5a**). They did not simply hear the message; they were transformed by it. It was evident they were in Christ and thus were among God's elect.

E. Just as the missionaries know the Thessalonians' election by the Spirit's work in their lives, so the Thessalonians know the type of men Paul and his companions had been during their visit, how they had conducted themselves for their sake, to bless the Thessalonians (**1:5b**). This is important because some in Thessalonica apparently were mischaracterizing the visit (see 2:1-12).

F. The missionaries praise them for receiving the gospel with joy despite being persecuted for their faith. In so doing, they were imitating the missionaries and the Lord (**1:6**).

1. Both the missionaries and the Lord Jesus joyfully endured suffering for the sake of the truth. Paul and Silas sang hymns to God from a Philippian jail after having been severely beaten and having their feet put in stocks (Acts 16:22-25). It says in Heb. 12:2 that Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him, and we can be sure that the one who commanded his disciples to rejoice in the face of persecution (e.g., Mat. 5:11-12) did so himself. God's work is so magnificent that any suffering pales in comparison to the joy of contributing to it or being a beneficiary of it.

2. Hardship is the normal lot of Christians. For instance, in Acts 14:22 Paul and Barnabas tell the churches of South Galatia, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," and in Jn. 16:33 Jesus told his disciples, "In this world you will have trouble."

3. Note that the joy they maintained in the face of persecution was given by the Holy Spirit. Not all signs of the Spirit's presence are miraculous. The deep conviction of the surpassing value of God's work in Christ is brought by the Spirit, and this conviction, plus inner strengthening by the Spirit, produces joy in adverse circumstances. In Gal. 5:22 joy is listed as a fruit of the Spirit.

G. As a result of their becoming imitators of the missionaries and the Lord by having joyful faith in the midst of affliction, they became an example for the believers in Macedonia and Achaia as their acceptance of the gospel, their faith in the God of that message, was told throughout the region (**1:7-9a**).

1. Indeed, that news had already arrived in places Paul went after Thessalonica. That is why he says in v. 8b-9a that they, the missionaries, do not need to tell about it; instead, the people where they are tell them about their visit to Thessalonica!

2. As the Thessalonians spread the news of their conversion and their faithfulness under fire, which dissemination would have been facilitated by their location on the Via Egnatia highway, believers in other towns learned of their exemplary conduct. This would include those who believed before hearing that news (e.g., Philippi) and those who came to faith after hearing that news (some to whom Paul preached after the visit to Thessalonica). In the latter case, the Thessalonians' conduct would go from a matter of curiosity, perhaps serving as a kind of pre-evangelism for Paul, to something seen as exemplary.

H. The news of the Thessalonians' conversion that spread included the description that they turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (**1:9b-10**).

1. It is easy for us to slip over the significance of the simple statement in v. 9b that they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." This abandonment of idolatry carried a huge social cost. Jeffrey Weima states (pp. 108-109):

The conversion of the Thessalonians is described in deceptively simple terms: "how you turned to God from idols" . . . Yet, in a society where cultic and social activities were intimately connected, there was nothing simple about turning to God from idols. Such a total renunciation of all pagan deities also meant a complete rejection of a variety of social events closely associated with the worship of these gods. Such action by Christians evoked feelings of resentment and anger in their non-Christian family members and friends. The exclusivity of these Christians – their seemingly arrogant refusal to participate in the worship of any god but their own – deeply wounded public sensibilities and even led to charges they were "atheists" (Barclay 1993: 514-15). Citizens of Thessalonica worried whether the gods, whose home on Mount Olympus they could see a mere fifty miles away to the southwest, might punish the whole city for the sacrilegious actions of a few by sending disease, famine, or other natural disasters. Turning from idols also meant a rejection of the imperial cult, thereby potentially jeopardizing Thessalonica's favored status with Rome and with the emperor. The conversion of the Thessalonian Christians involved a truly radical break with their previous way of life – a

break that naturally incurred the resentment and anger of their fellow citizens (2:14).

2. There is a lot packed into v. 10 as well – Jesus' resurrection from the dead, his ascension to heaven, the coming wrath of the final judgment, and the fact Jesus is the one who rescues them, his disciples, from that wrath. This is an early letter, probably A.D. 50, which shows Paul was preaching those things from the very beginning.

III. Defense of Visit (2:1-12)

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our visit to you was not in vain, ²but having previously suffered and having been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the courage in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in [the face of] much opposition. ³For our appeal is not from deception nor from impurity [of motives] or with trickery. ⁴On the contrary, as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who tests our hearts. ⁵For neither at any time did we come with a word of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed - God is a witness - ⁶nor seeking praise from men, neither from you nor from others. ⁷Although being able, as apostles of Christ, to be a burden on you, instead we were gentle in your midst, as when a nursemaid comforts her own children. ⁸Longing for you in this way, we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, for you became our loved ones.

⁹Indeed you remember, brothers, our labor and toil; while working day and night in order not to burden any of you, we preached the gospel of God to you. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly, righteously, and blamelessly we acted toward you who believe - ¹¹how, as you know, [we treated] each one of you as a father [treats] his own children, ¹²exhorting and encouraging and imploring you so that you might walk worthily of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

A. The Thessalonians knew that the missionaries' visit to them had not been worthless, had not been without positive effect, as some apparently were suggesting. On the contrary, despite what Paul and Silas had previously suffered in Philippi, they had the courage to preach the gospel to the Thessalonians in the face of much opposition, and this had a great effect (2:1-2).

1. The spreading of the gospel is fiercely opposed. Look at today: It is mocked in Hollywood and by self-appointed cultural elites; characterized as dangerous, corrupt, and anti-intellectual by the media; driven out of whatever the government touches (which is ever increasing); increasingly deemed unacceptable by corporate America; and treated with vitriol and violence by homosexual and abortion activists. The reason for this opposition is that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world-controlling powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12).

2. Despite the opposition they faced, the missionaries refused to be silenced. With great courage supplied by God, they offered the Thessalonians God's gift of life. These men were not cowards who retreated from potential hardship. Rather, they risked suffering in order to bless others.

B. They had courage to speak in the face of such opposition (and thus had an impact among the Thessalonians) because ("For") they were doing it to please God (**2:3-4**).

1. In the missionaries' absence, some of their opponents apparently were suggesting that the real motive behind their visit to Thessalonica was to get something for themselves. There have always been religious hucksters, and that is how they were being portrayed.

2. Paul points to the courage they showed in the face of opposition as proof that they were not acting in self-interest. If they had been trying to "sell them a bill of goods," had been acting out of false motives, they would not have endured such opposition. When the going gets tough, the snake-oil salesman hits the road.

3. Their courage was rooted in the fact they preach the gospel on behalf of the living God. They were driven by their desire to serve him faithfully, a mission that dwarfed all danger and opposition. We live in a culture that increasingly cannot imagine there is *anything* larger than oneself, any purpose or cause that is worthy of suffering or death, but Paul and his companions knew otherwise.

C. The Thessalonians (and God himself!) knew that at no time did the missionaries use flattery or any pretext for greed, nor were they seeking any type of emotional payoff in the form of human praise or glorification (**2:5-6**). True preaching is a noble thing. It is not about getting but giving. Paul was a scholar, a man of great learning. He could have had, in the world's eyes, a much more prestigious career, but he chose to serve God. One of the tragedies of today is how ministry has come to be seen. It is perceived as a way to get rather than to give.

D. Rather than being a (financial) burden on the Thessalonians, which they rightfully could have been as apostles of Christ, the missionaries were gentle with them, as a nursemaid comforting her own children (**2:7**).

1. The right of support for those who preach the gospel was established by Jesus when he sent out the 12 in Matthew 10 and the 70 in Luke 10. In Lk. 10:7 he said, "Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid" (NRSV). See also, Mat. 10:10. That is why Paul says in 1 Cor. 9:14 that "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."

2. But having the right to support does not mean it must be exercised. In the case of the Thessalonians, they went the extra mile to ease the situation of these infant

Christians. They chose to relieve them of any obligation of support to help establish them in the gospel. This gentle handling of their situation made the charge of self-interest doubly absurd.

E. They so loved the Thessalonians that they were pleased to share not only the gospel but themselves, to put themselves at the Thessalonians' disposal. If anybody was being taken advantage of, it was Paul, Silas, and Timothy! (2:8)

F. The Thessalonians knew very well that the missionaries had not been freeloaders. While preaching they had "labored and toiled night and day" to provide for their own needs. If they were trying to beat somebody out of something, they had a strange way of going about it! (2:9)

G. The Thessalonians (and God!) witnessed the integrity with which the missionaries conducted themselves (2:10-12).

1. They acted devoutly, righteously, and blamelessly toward the Thessalonians. They were what they claimed to be, namely emissaries of God, and everything they did was consistent with that.

2. Their interest was not self aggrandizement but to help the Thessalonians live lives worthy of (walk worthily of) God who calls them. It was toward that end they spent their time, exhorting and encouraging the Thessalonians, not trying to get something for themselves.

a. In general, to live in a manner worthy of something means to act in accordance with the value and importance of that thing, to act with a proper appreciation of its worth. To live worthily of God in the sense Paul means is not to live sinlessly; that will not happen until the eternal state. Rather, it is to live devoutly, piously, striving in all seriousness to live as God would have us live because he is worthy of such submission, effort, and self-denial.

b. This desire for Christians to live worthily of God, to live as he would have us live – dare I say to heed his "Do's and Don'ts" – is often expressed by Paul. He says in Eph. 4:1, "*I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you, therefore, to walk worthily of the calling to which you were called*"; he says in Phil. 1:27a, "*Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*"; he says in Col. 1:10a, "*in order that you may walk worthily of the Lord.*" Jesus himself says in Rev. 3:4, "*Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.*" Later in this same letter (4:1), he says they had instructed them how they must walk so as to please God.

c. Paul's focus with these new Christians is on their sanctification, on their living surrendered, obedient lives. I worry that we sometimes are more concerned with making people comfortable, with appealing to their wants so they will choose to join or stay with our group, than with calling them to live crucified lives to the

glory of God. We shy away from feeding people the truth of how God would have us live and exhorting them to live accordingly because we fear it will turn off people in our culture who do not want a religion that challenges "their truth" about what constitutes moral living. That is a bargain with the devil because it deprives the church of the instruction, exhortation, and encouragement it needs.

IV. Further Thanksgiving for Thessalonians (2:13-16)

¹³And on account of this we also constantly give thanks to God, that having received the word you heard from us about God you accepted it not as the word of men but as it truly is, the word of God, which is also at work among you who believe. ¹⁴For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea because you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they suffered from the Jews ¹⁵who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets; who drove us out; who displease God; and who are opposed to all men, ¹⁶hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; thus continually filling up the measure of their sins, but the anger against them has reached the limit.

A. They constantly give thanks to God that the Thessalonians accepted their preaching about God for what it is, the word of God and not the word of men (2:13).

1. The gospel – the news of God acting to rescue fallen creation through the death, resurrection, and ascension of his Son, Jesus Christ – is a divine revelation. It is therefore unadulterated truth; we can accept it or reject it, but we cannot alter it.

2. They are thankful they accepted the gospel as the word of God because in doing so they gave it the trust it deserves. The Thessalonians were not tentative and reserved in their acceptance; they wholeheartedly embraced the message as truth and acted accordingly. That word was at work among them, transforming them through their acceptance of it.

B. Evidence of their accepting the gospel as God's word and of its impact on them was the fact they suffered for their faith the same way the churches in Judea had suffered, i.e., they were persecuted by their countrymen (2:14).

1. Persecution is a natural concomitant of the Christian faith (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 3:3-4; Jn. 15:18-19, 17:14; 2 Tim. 3:12). By accepting and presenting the message of truth, the word of God, Christians expose human rebellion and false religion, so those engaged in those things resent and hate them.

2. The zeal that endures persecution is rooted in the conviction that the gospel is "bigger" than this life. It is the news of God's acting in Christ to heal this sin-sick creation. The kingdom of God has been inaugurated or sown, and by the power and working of God it will at Christ's return become the eternal and perfect state of joy,

peace, love, and fellowship that fulfills all human longing. No temporary suffering is worth abandoning this hope or the God who provides it.

C. Comment on the persecuting activity of the unbelieving Jews

1. They killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets (**2:15a**).

a. He means, of course, that they instigated his crucifixion by the Romans. In the only other place where Paul specifies the agents of Jesus' death, they are "the rulers of this age" (1 Cor. 2:8). I take this to mean the rulers of Rome and Israel who, acting in the perversity of the world's wisdom, were led to the ultimate in wrong action, crucifying the Lord of glory.

b. As for their killing the prophets, Weima explains (p. 171), "By NT times, therefore, the killing of the prophets had become a common way to refer to the persecution of the faithful remnant within Israel by the unrighteous." The Jews who were persecuting them were cut from the same cloth as those who had killed the prophets. As Stephen said to his persecutors in Act 7:51-53: ⁵¹ *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you."* ⁵² *Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,* ⁵³ *you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."*

c. It is possible this also refers to the killing of Christian prophets. Recall that in Mat. 23:34 Jesus predicted the killing of prophets he would send. But there are no clear examples of Christian prophets having been killed before this letter. Certainly there were well-known martyrs (e.g., Stephen and James son of Zebedee), but none of them is anywhere identified as a prophet.

2. They drove us, the missionaries, out (**2:15b**), probably referring to how they were treated in Thessalonica and Berea, and they displease God because they are opposing his work in Christ (**2:15c**).

3. They are opposed to all mankind in the sense they prevent the missionaries from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved (**2:15d-16a**). The clear implication is that unless the Gentiles are spoken to they will not be saved. This is consistent with Rom. 10:13-15.

D. They thus continually are filling up the measure of their sins. God has been amazingly patient with them, but his anger (the cup of his wrath) has now reached the limit (**2:16b-c**).

1. Paul seems to be suggesting that God's wrath has begun to be poured out on the Jews, but his specific referent(s) is unclear. Perhaps he was thinking of the trouble the Romans had recently caused the Jews. In A.D. 49 Claudius expelled the Jews

from Rome (Acts 18:2), and that same year thousands of Jews were killed in Jerusalem, perhaps in reprisal for the violence of certain Jewish nationalists (see Weima, 177).

2. This conflict continued to smolder and spark during the remainder of Cumanus's term as procurator of Palestine (A.D. 48-52), and things got worse under Felix, who was procurator from A.D. 52-59. He ruthlessly stamped out any type of insurgent activity, and in doing so, Josephus says he crucified an "incalculable" number of people. The Jewish Revolt against Rome, which began in A.D. 66, culminated in the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, the destruction Jesus had prophesied (see, e.g., Mat. 23:37 - 24:2) (see F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 341 ff.; and F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 49).

E. Paul obviously is not anti-Jewish (e.g., Rom. 9:1-5). He is a Jew and loves his people dearly. He is speaking of hard-hearted Jews who refuse to accept and who actively oppose God's purpose in Christ.

V. Reassurance Regarding Separation (2:17 - 3:13)

A. *Longing during separation (2:17-20)*

¹⁷But we, brothers, having been orphaned from you for a short time (in person, not in heart), endeavored intensely with great desire to see your face. ¹⁸For we resolved to come to you – certainly I, Paul, [did] once and again – but Satan thwarted us. ¹⁹For what is our hope or joy or crown of glorying in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰Yes, you are our glory and joy.

1. The missionaries describe their forced separation from the Thessalonians as having been orphaned, playing on the intensity of the parent-child relationship. They also assure them it was only a physical separation not a separation of heart (affection) (2:17).

2. In response to that separation they sought fervently and with great desire to see the Thessalonians again, having resolved to go back to them. Paul here interjects that he certainly did so on more than one occasion. But Satan thwarted their efforts (2:18). We are not told how Satan blocked their return, whether by guards, threats against the church members, sickness, bad weather, or some other means. Nor are we told how they knew it was Satan rather than the Spirit steering them in another direction as in Acts 16:6-10. But he blocked it, and they knew it. There is an ongoing spiritual battle!

3. As good fruit of the missionaries' labor for Christ, as evidence of the manner in which they discharged their commission, the Thessalonians will result in a blessing (a "well done faithful servant") for the missionaries at the return of Christ.

Therefore, the Thessalonians cannot doubt the missionaries' concern for their spiritual welfare (2:19-20).

B. Sending of Timothy (3:1-5)

Therefore, when we could no longer bear it, we decided to be left in Athens by ourselves² and sent Timothy, our brother and fellow-worker for God in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith³ so that no one would be shaken by these afflictions. Indeed, you yourselves know that we are destined for this,⁴ for even when we were with you we were predicting to you that we would be afflicted, and so it turned out, as you know. ⁵For this reason, I myself, being no longer able to bear it, sent to learn about your faith, fearing that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain.

1. Their concern for the Thessalonians' welfare became so great they sent Timothy to them to strengthen and encourage them in the faith so that they (the Thessalonian Christians) would not be shaken by the persecutions they were experiencing (3:1-3a).

2. The Thessalonians knew that Christians are destined for afflictions, for when the missionaries were there they predicted they would be afflicted, just as it turned out. Paul wants no one to be surprised by persecution, no one to take opposition as a sign of Christianity's failure (3:3b-4). Weima comments (p. 213):

This belief that the Christian faith inevitably evokes opposition and suffering is a conviction common not only to Paul (e.g., Rom. 5:3; 8:17; 2 Cor. 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:23-33; Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 3:12) but also other NT writers (e.g., Matt. 5:11-12, 44; 10:17-23; 23:34; 24:9-10; Mark 8:34-35; John 16:33; Acts 9:16; 14:22; 1 Pet. 1:6; 3:13-17; Rev. 2:10). This widespread and consistent testimony of Scripture leads Best (1977:135) to forward the maxim: "Normality is persecution." There is no justification here or anywhere else in Scripture for a health-and-wealth gospel in which believers are guaranteed a life free from difficulty and suffering.

3. Paul sent Timothy to learn how their faith was faring, fearing that the tempter had succeeded in pulling them from the faith. Though opposition and persecution come through people, Paul knows the ultimate source of this conduct is the tempter. Their abandoning the faith was a real possibility, and if they did so, the missionaries' labor would have been for nothing (3:5).

C. Joy over Timothy's report (3:6-10)

⁶But now Timothy has come to us from you and has told us good news about your faith and love and that you always have a fond memory of us, longing to see us as we

also [long to see] you. ⁷Because of this, brothers, we were encouraged about you in all our distress and affliction by your faith. ⁸For we now live if you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on account of you, ¹⁰as night and day we pray most earnestly to see your face and to complete the shortcomings of your faith?

1. Timothy brings good news about the Thessalonians' faith in Christ, their love for God and one another, and their longing to see the missionaries. This evidence of the vitality of the Thessalonians' faith encourages Paul et al., despite the distress and affliction that was a constant part of Paul's ministry (**3:6-7**). Recall that after being forced out of Thessalonica they faced similar treatment in Berea (Acts 17:1-15), and then Paul was mocked in Athens for preaching Jesus' resurrection (Acts 17:32). The opposition continued when they were in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17), the place from which 1 Thessalonians was written. Paul says in 1 Cor. 2:3 that he was with the Corinthians in weakness and in fear and much trembling,

2. The state of the Thessalonians' faith was so important to the missionaries that, having received the good news about it, they say they "now live." They mean that their love for the Thessalonians is such that the news of their faith has provided a new sense of strength and joy; their lives have been uplifted and renewed in vigor (**3:8**).

3. The news of the Thessalonians' faith gave them such joy that they wondered how they could ever thank God enough for it (**3:9**). They are praying steadily and earnestly to see the Thessalonians again and to provide what is lacking in their faith. The notion of "brother" meant something to them! (**3:10**)

D. Prayer for Thessalonians (3:11-13)

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹²And may the Lord cause you to increase and to abound in love for one another and for everyone, as we too [have love] for you, ¹³so as to establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones, [amen].

1. They pray that God the Father himself and the Lord Jesus will prepare the way for them to come to the Thessalonians (just as they said they have been praying) (**3:11**).

a. This is quite possibly directed at the removal of some Satanic obstacle (see 2:18), which may explain why Paul adds "himself" to "God the Father." He may be contrasting his own repeated and ineffectual attempts to get around Satan's obstacles with the need for a more direct divine intervention.

b. Though Paul clearly distinguishes between God the Father and the Lord Jesus (definite article precedes both), he also assumes they are in some way

unified. God the Father and the Lord Jesus are a compound subject, and yet Paul describes their action with a singular verb (κατευθύναι – aorist active optative third person singular) rather than a plural. Gordon Fee remarks in *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 130-131, "That he [Paul] does this in such a matter-of-fact way, and without explanation or argumentation, is at the same time sure evidence that he must have previously instructed them not only on the saving work of Christ, but also on *who* the divine Savior actually was." He does the same thing in 2 Thess. 2:16-17.

2. They pray for the Lord Jesus to cause the Thessalonians to increase and to abound in love for one another and for everyone, which includes those outside the Christian faith, those who are persecuting them. They are praying that the Thessalonians' love will increase and abound to be like the love that they, the missionaries, have for the Thessalonians (**3:12**). That certainly says a lot about their love for the Thessalonians.

(a) And notice how Paul, a Jew for whom the Shema (Deut. 6:4 - "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD) was a fundamental confession, addresses in prayer both God the Father and God's Son (1:10), the Lord Jesus, without any monotheistic discomfort. Gordon Fee remarks (p. 131), "Here is a strict monotheist praying with ease to both the Father and the Son, focusing first on the one and then the other, without a sense that his monotheism is being stretched or is in some kind of danger."

(b) You see in 1 Cor. 8:6 how Paul, by the Spirit, conceives the essential unity of the Father and Son. Regarding that text, David Garland writes (p. 375), "Paul creatively christianizes the foundational Jewish monotheistic confession: 'The Lord our God is one Lord' (Deut. 6:4). He glosses the reference to Lord and God in that confession so that 'God' refers to the Father and 'the Lord' refers to Christ."

3. The result or goal of the growth in love for which they are praying is to establish the Thessalonians' hearts blameless in holiness in God's presence at Jesus' coming (**3:13**).

a. Jesus is coming back (Jn. 14:1-4; Rev. 1:7), and he is coming in glory with the holy angels (Mat. 13:41; Mk. 8:38, 13:27; 2 Thess. 1:6-8; Jude 14-15; Rev. 19:14)! Christians live in this blessed hope. Gene Green comments (p. 181):

The Lord Jesus will come with power and glory, as a warrior on the day of the Lord (Zech. 14:1-9), and his *holy ones* will come with him. Here at the close of this section of the letter, Paul's prayer introduces one of the great themes of the second part of this letter, the coming of the Lord. He will come with armies greater than those of Alexander III or the Romans. He is the coming king whom they await!

b. It is not obvious how abounding in love for people translates into the establishment of one's heart blameless in holiness at the return of Jesus. I think it

"establishes" one's heart, fortifies it or allows it to stand confidently on that day, because love, understood as a sacrificial commitment to another's welfare, motivates and summarizes a genuinely ethical life, a life in which one treats others as God desires (Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 13:1-7). The result of that faithful living is an inner assurance that one is blameless in the matter of holiness, not meaning one is sinless but that one is exemplary in conforming to God's character. This will yield confidence (establish the heart) before God because it confirms the reality of one's allegiance to the Savior.

c. This is the same idea John expresses in 1 Jn. 2:3-6 and 3:18-20. Living right, keeping God's commands intently, albeit imperfectly, reassures one of the reality of one's saving faith and thus provides a sense of assurance of one's relationship with God. The fact obedience is inadequate to save anyone because it is imperfect does not mean it must be irrelevant to one's sense of assurance.

VI. Exhortation and Instruction (4:1 - 5:22)

A. Keeping prior instructions (4:1-2)

Furthermore then, brothers, we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you received from us [instruction about] how you must walk so as to please God (as indeed you are walking), you do so even more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

1. Nearly all English translations render the opening word of v. 1 (*loipon*) as "Finally," which suggests it is the very last topic of the letter. But the meaning is more flexible than that, functioning as a transition to something new. I think it is better rendered here "Furthermore," as in the KJV, or something like the NIV's "as for other matters."

2. In light of their desire to remedy any lack in the Thessalonians' faith (3:10) and the prayer that the Thessalonians may, by abounding in love, end up with hearts that are *blameless in holiness*, they move to exhorting the brothers (and sisters) to right living. There is a way Christians must live ("walk" being a metaphor for conducting one's life) so as to please God (**4:1a-b**). The fact we are saved by grace does not mean God is indifferent about how we live. The God who saved us calls us to a life of submission and obedience.

3. The missionaries previously instructed them how they must live, and those instructions were given through the authority of the Lord Jesus. To disobey those instructions was not to disobey Paul or Silas; it was to disobey the Lord! (**4:2**)

4. Even though they were living in accordance with the will of God, the missionaries urge them to do so even more (**4:1b-c**). The Christian life is a constant pursuit of Christlikeness. We are to call each other upward in that pursuit, and the

missionaries are aware of particular areas in which the Thessalonians especially needed to grow.

B. Sexual purity (4:3-8)

³For this is God's will, your sanctification: you must abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴each of you [are] to know how to control his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God, ⁶that one not wrong or take advantage of his brother in this matter, for the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as indeed we previously told you and warned you. ⁷For God did not call us to impurity but in sanctification. ⁸Therefore, the one who rejects this does not reject man but God who [also] gives his Holy Spirit to you.

1. Paul now gets particular about an area in which they need to increase their conformity to the will of God. God's will for them, an important part of how they are to be sanctified, is that they abstain from sexual immorality (4:3).

a. God specifically forbids sex outside of marriage. The fact you're in love is no exception. Sam Storms wrote in his recent article "[The Problem of Porneia](#)":

Every Greek lexicon or dictionary of the NT is in agreement, that *porneia* refers to any form of sexual activity before or outside the relationship of monogamous marriage between a man and a woman. It can refer to pre-marital sex, adultery, homosexual practice, prostitution, bestiality, and all other expressions of sexual activity outside the marital relationship between a husband and wife. . . . If you want to continue living in unrepentant sexual sin, call yourself culturally sophisticated, call yourself socially liberated, call yourself in step with changing times. Just don't call yourself a Christian.

b. Of course, every society prescribes the method of marriage, the act(s) by which a couple moves from being unmarried to married. We have some today who wear the name of Christ who are living together in a sexual relationship without having gotten married, and they salve their consciences with the lie that they really are married because they are committed to each other. They will say, "Who needs a piece of paper?" Well, anyone who wants to be married in our society. Living together in a sexual relationship does not constitute a marriage. The woman at the well in John 4, after having had five husbands, was living in a sexual relationship with a man, and yet Jesus tells her in Jn. 4:18 that this man with whom she is living is *not her husband*. Cohabiting in a sexual relationship without marriage is simply sexual immorality.

c. It is understood that sexual desire will tempt them in the wrong direction. Not only was sexual promiscuity rampant in the ancient Greco-Roman world, but a number of pagan religions of the day, including the most popular religions of

Thessalonica, had a significant sexual component (Weima, 263). But rather than giving in to that lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God, they must learn to gain control over their "vessel" – meaning their bodies or, more specifically, their sex organ – in sanctification and honor (**4:4-5**). The body belongs to the Lord, and they must use it in a way that honors him.

2. Weima comments (pp. 264-266):

This persistent emphasis on holiness reveals an important truth about the theological perspective from which Paul views the Thessalonian believers and issues his exhortations to them. Holiness was the defining characteristic and desired purpose for Israel, God's covenant people. It was the attribute by which the people of God were to be distinguished from all other nations. . . .

What is surprising and even astonishing, however, is that Paul applies this standard of holiness to predominantly Gentile believers in Jesus at Thessalonica. . . . The holiness that has previously been the characteristic distinguishing Israel from the Gentile nations has now also become the boundary marker that separates the Thessalonian Gentile believers from "the Gentiles who do not know God" (4:5), those who are "outside" God's holy people (4:12). Paul, it seems clear, views his Gentile converts at Thessalonica as the renewed Israel – as those who, together with Jewish Christians, are now full members of God's covenant people. And on the basis of their privileged new position, he exhorts them in 4:3-8 to exhibit the holiness that God's people have always been called to possess.

3. As Peter says in 1 Pet. 1:14-16: ¹⁴As obedient children, do not conform to the former passions [when] in your ignorance, ¹⁵but like the Holy One who called you, you also be holy in all your conduct. ¹⁶For it is written, "Be holy, because I am holy."

4. The phrase "that one not wrong or take advantage of his brother in this matter" sounds like a specific application of this principle to something going on in Thessalonica (**4:6a**). Paul seems to be alluding to a situation where a brother's lust had led him to pursue sexual intentions with another brother's wife (or daughter). Paul rebukes the man anonymously, perhaps being unsure of facts or details, for trying to destroy that brother's relationship with his wife (or dishonor his daughter and his family and deprive him of his daughter's value as a bride). That would be wrong and would constitute taking advantage of the brother's trust in allowing social access to his wife (or daughter) as part of Christian fellowship.

5. The Lord will mete out punishment with regard to all such things. A person cannot choose to live in sin and have a relationship with God (Gal. 5:19-21). Those without such a relationship will be condemned when the Lord returns, as they previously had been informed and warned (**4:6b**).

6. They were not called to impurity but in sanctification, so they must strive to live up to the fact they have been specially set apart for God (4:7). To fail to do so is not to reject man but God, who gives them his empowering and transforming Holy Spirit (4:8).

C. Brotherly love (4:9-12)

⁹Now concerning brotherly love, you do not have need [for us] to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another, ¹⁰for indeed you do it to all the brothers in the whole of Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to abound [in love] more, ¹¹to aspire to live a quiet life, to attend to your own affairs, and to work with your own hands, just as we commanded you, ¹²in order that you may walk properly before the outsiders and may have need of nothing.

1. Regarding brotherly love, they are taught *by God* to love each other (4:9), the indication of which ("*for indeed*") is that they in fact love all the brothers in the whole of Macedonia (4:10a). This suggests that to be taught by God is to be taught his will efficaciously, to be transformed by the Spirit in conjunction with the revelation of God's will. The focus is not on how God's will is communicated, whether directly or through intermediaries, but on its effect; to be taught by God is to be changed by God. Otherwise, one has refused to be taught by him.

2. As noted, the Thessalonians not only were loving each other but also were loving the brothers throughout Macedonia. Still, the missionaries urge them to do so even more (4:10a-b).

3. Part of loving their brothers was to supply their own needs (so as not to be a burden on their brothers) and to behave properly in the sight of the outsiders (so as not to damage the reputation of their brothers). They did this by not being busybodies, people who meddle in other people's affairs and often stir up trouble in the process, and by working instead of being idle (4:11-12). (Both "live a quiet life" and "attend to your own affairs" here mean looking after one's own business, the opposite of "being a busybody" in 2 Thess. 3:11.) The urging to work with their own hands, which is something they earlier had been commanded to do, reflects the fact they were, for the most part, manual laborers.

D. Second Coming (4:13 - 5:11)

1. and the faithful deceased (4:13-18)

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are sleeping so that you may not grieve like the others who have no hope. ¹⁴For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way God also will, through Jesus, bring with

him the ones who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are living, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the call of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, ¹⁸and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

a. The Thessalonians apparently had failed to retain or to comprehend adequately what Paul no doubt had taught them about the resurrection of the dead. I say he no doubt taught them that because the resurrection of believers is a fundamental element of Christian teaching (see, e.g., Heb. 6:1-2) and was central to Paul's theology. Perhaps cultural countercurrents had hindered their comprehension or undermined their hold on that teaching. Or maybe confusion and doubt was already being generated by the false claim that Paul later learns about, the claim he addresses in 2 Thess. 2:1-3 that the Second Coming had already occurred. I can imagine that claim causing people to worry about the fate of beloved brothers or sisters who were not resurrected after the Lord supposedly returned or who died after that time.

b. We are not told what is behind the Thessalonians' concern about the fate of their deceased fellow Christians. But as a result, they were now grieving (or in danger of grieving) over them just as non-Christians, those who have no hope of blessed resurrection life, grieved over their loved ones who had died (**4:13**).

c. Grieving is proper for Christians because death is an enemy (Acts 8:2, 9:39; Phil. 2:27), but we do so from a different perspective. We know that death is not the final word. Christians never see each other for the last time.

d. The solution to their grieving like others who have no hope lies in the fact they, as Christians, believe that Jesus died and rose again. A corollary of that belief is that God will do for those who died in Christ, died as Christians, the same as he did for Jesus, i.e., raise them from the dead. But Paul expresses that corollary indirectly. He says that just as God raised Jesus from the dead, so God also will, through Jesus [*on the basis of Jesus' atoning work*], bring with him [*with Jesus when he returns*] those who have fallen asleep [*the souls of those who died as Christians for reunification with their now glorified bodies in the general resurrection of the dead*] (**4:14**).

(1) Physical death or loss of life involves the separation of body and soul/spirit. The compound that is "you" is dissolved into two elements: body and spirit. James 2:26 states, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." See also Gen. 2:7 and 3:19 (implied), 35:18 (Rachel's soul departing at death); Eccles. 12:7 (spirit returns to God); Mat. 27:50 (Jesus gave up his spirit); Lk. 8:55 (restoration of Jairus's daughter to life described as her spirit returning); Acts 7:59 (Stephen prays for Jesus to receive his spirit); 2 Pet. 1:13-14 (Peter speaks of dying as the putting off of his tent).

(2) That the soul/spirit remains conscious after the separation from the body that is death is indicated in Isa. 14:9-10,¹ Ezek. 32:21, 31, Lk. 16:19-31, and Rev. 6:9-11. In addition, Jesus told the crucified rebel in Lk. 23:43 that he would be with him that day in "paradise." This carries a connotation of pleasantness that seems inapplicable to an unconscious state. As Darrell Bock notes *Luke 9:51-24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1858, Jesus' reply "suggests that the criminal will be in some conscious, intermediate state until the resurrection, though this conclusion is implied, rather than explicit."

(3) As indicated in 1 Thess. 1:10, 4:16, and 2 Thess. 1:7, Jesus comes from heaven when he returns, and that is where the souls of dead Christians reside, as indicated by Phil. 1:21-24, Acts 7:56-59, Rev. 6:9 and 20:4-6. As Derek Thomas remarks in his book *Heaven on Earth* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2018), 61, "When the saints die, they leave half of themselves behind!" God brings those souls with Jesus at the Second Coming for the purpose of resurrection.

e. Paul's elaboration in **4:15-17** confirms that he is speaking of the resurrection of deceased saints in speaking of God's bringing with Jesus those who have died.

(1) He says in v. 15 that, by the Lord's word, whether a traditional teaching or prophesy given to Paul, those who are alive at the Second Coming will not precede those who have died. Rather, as he says in v. 16, the Lord *himself*, Jesus in person, will come down from heaven (see Acts 1:11), in conjunction with a cry of command, the call of an archangel (Michael?), and the sound of God's trumpet, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

(2) And then, according to v. 17, those who had not experienced death, together with those who are resurrected, will meet the returning Lord in the air. So as Paul makes clear in 1 Cor. 15:42-57, the bodies of both the dead saints and those who are alive at the time will be transformed into bodies that are imperishable, glorious, immortal, and powerful, bodies. As he puts it in Phil. 3:20-21: ²⁰*For our commonwealth exists in heaven, from where also we eagerly await a Savior, [the] Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who will transform the body of our humiliation [into] conformity with the body of his glory by the working of his power even to subject all things to himself.* Having been resurrected, the Lord's body is immortalized, no longer subject to death (Rom. 6:9).

(3) The phrase in v. 17 translated "to meet" (*eis apantēsin*, lit. "for a meeting") is understood by most commentators to refer to the ancient civic custom of sending a delegation of citizens out to welcome an important visitor and to escort him on the final leg of his journey to the city. It is illustrated in Acts 28:14-16 where the brothers came from Rome as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns "to

¹ The inhabitants are referred to as "shades" or "weak ones" in that they are only a shadow or reflection of the full persons they were on earth.

meet" Paul and accompany him for the remainder of his overland journey from Puteoli to Rome.

(4) Jeffrey Weima says (p. 334), "it is highly probable that Paul's use of *apantēsis* reflects this civic custom in antiquity." Gary Shogren states in *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 190: "Based on this conventional usage of 'meeting' (ἀπάντησις), it may be concluded with a relatively high degree of certainty that Paul envisions Jesus coming in the air; resurrected believers and then living ones will ascend to honor him, and *they will then accompany him back to earth.*"

f. This magnificent entourage of transformed, immortalized believers that accompanies the Lord back to earth then enjoys forever life in the consummated kingdom of God (4:18a). This is life on the new earth, in a creation that has been "heavenized"; life in a perfect reality of love and fellowship with God and one another and in which there will be no death, mourning, crying, or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Rev. 21:4). Creation's participation in the consummation is likewise expressed by Paul in Rom. 8:18-23.

g. It is no wonder that he tells them to encourage one another with these words! (4:18b) This is the finalization of God's rescue of creation, the goal toward which all of history has been moving since sin entered creation.

2. and specific times (5:1-11)

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you do not have a need [for us] to write to you, ²for you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night. ³When they are saying, "Peace and security," then sudden destruction comes on them as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will by no means escape. ⁴But you, brothers, are not in darkness that the day should overtake you as a thief. ⁵For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night nor of darkness. ⁶So then, let us not sleep as the others but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. ⁸But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love and the hope of salvation for a helmet, ⁹because God has not destined us for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ ¹⁰who died on our behalf, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live together with him. ¹¹Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

a. Regarding the timing of the Second Coming, "the times and seasons" being a stock phrase referring to the timing of eschatological events (Weima, 344), they did not need any instruction. They already understood that the "day of the Lord," the day Christ returns to judge mankind and to consummate the kingdom he inaugurated, comes as a thief in the night (5:1-2).

(1) This image suggests that it comes at an unknown time and with negative consequences for the unprepared, those who are not on guard. Jesus used this same imagery when speaking of his return in Mat. 24:42-44 and Lk. 12:39-40 (see also, Rev. 3:3, 16:15). Paul probably is drawing on this teaching, which shows it was circulating in some form prior to 50 A.D.

(2) Paul confirms and reinforces their understanding that there is an element of unpredictability regarding the Second Coming, which suggests that some question had arisen about the matter. Whatever that question may have been, Paul disposes of it indirectly by telling them they already know the truth, that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Whatever signs may precede the Lord's return, they will not be such as to completely remove the element of unpredictability.

(3) As I noted, it is clear from 2 Thess. 2:1-3 that Paul later learned of a false claim circulating in Thessalonica that the Second Coming had already occurred. There he will emphasize that certain events must precede the Second Coming to reassure the church that the event had not already occurred. So they were prone to confusion about aspects of the Second Coming.

b. As for the connotation of negative consequences that is implicit in the image of a thief coming in the night, Paul reassures the Thessalonians that that is relevant only for unbelievers (**5:3**). Unbelievers will be oblivious, holding to a false sense of "peace and security," when destruction comes on them with the same suddenness as labor pains on a pregnant woman. There will be no escape. For those who are not in Christ, the day of the Lord is going to be a terrible day of judgment (e.g., Mat. 25:31-46).

c. But the effect of that coming is different for Christians. Christians are not in darkness, a state of ignorance about God's work in Christ, that the day of the Lord should overtake them as a thief, in the sense that it should find them unprepared and vulnerable to harm. Rather, Christians are sons of light and sons of the day (**5:4-5**). Weima comments (p. 355), "The Christians in Thessalonica may not know precisely when this event will take place, but they are adequately informed and prepared for this day of judgment."

d. As sons of light and sons of the day, Christians must keep awake and be sober. In other words, they must remain alert to his promised coming, not lapsing in their preparedness. The oblivious states of sleep and drunkenness occur at night, so they are not fitting for children of the day (**5:6-7**).

e. Christians are to remain alert and prepared for that day, dressed in the spiritual armor of faith, love, and hope of salvation because a lack of vigilance may lead to a loss of the salvation for which they are destined through Jesus Christ. We must remain faithful to the end of the race (see, 1 Thess. 3:5; 1 Cor. 15:1-2; Gal. 6:7-9; 2 Tim. 4:6-8; 2 Pet. 2:17-22) (**5:8-9**).

f. Jesus died on our behalf, so that whether we die before he returns or are alive at that time, we may live together with him (e.g., Rev. 21:22-27). We need to encourage and build up one another with this fact (**5:10-11**).

E. Recognition of leaders (5:12-13)

¹²Now we ask you, brothers, to know the ones who labor among you and who lead you in the Lord and admonish you ¹³and to regard them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

1. They ask them "to know" a certain group of people, those who labor among them, lead (or care for) them, and admonish them. The group clearly consists of the spiritual leaders in the congregation. They care for them by laboring hard, labor which involves instructing them in the things of the Lord (1 Tim. 5:17). "To know" simply may mean to be acquainted with the leaders, but it more likely means to respect, appreciate, or acknowledge them (**5:12**).

2. They are to regard these people very highly in love because of the work in which they are engaged. It is the work of nurturing, guiding, and protecting the congregation (**5:13a**).

3. The directive to be at peace among themselves suggests that some were quarreling with the leaders out of a lack of proper appreciation for them (**5:13b**). (The fresh start in v. 14 suggests that v. 13b goes closely with what precedes.) One can well imagine tension between the leaders and the idlers mentioned in the next verse.

F. Various duties (5:14-22)

¹⁴And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, comfort the downcast, help the weak, and be patient toward all. ¹⁵See to it that no one repays evil for evil but always pursue what is good for one another and for everyone. ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray constantly, ¹⁸and give thanks in everything, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit, ²⁰do not despise prophecies ²¹(but test every-thing), hold firmly to what is good, ²²keep away from every kind of evil.

1. Admonish the idle (**5:14**) – The adjective ἄτακτος can have a general sense of being disorderly, unruly, or insubordinate, but here it probably carries the more specific nuance of being disorderly with respect to work, meaning being idle or lazy (RSV, NRSV, NAB, ESV, NIV ["idle and disruptive"]). Paul alluded to this problem in 4:11 where he urged them to work with their hands, and he uses words derived from this same root three times in 2 Thess. 3:6-12 in a context where Christians were unwilling to work and were sponging off the church. Paul urges the brothers to admonish or warn those people, to turn them from their wrongful behavior.

2. Comfort the downcast (**5:14**) – Perhaps this refers to those who recently lost a loved one, as suggested in 4:13. Weima notes (p. 393) that the verb "comfort" (παραμυθέομαι) is used by Paul only in 1 Thess. 2:12 and 5:14. He says, "It frequently is used to describe the encouragement or consolation given to those who have suffered the death of a loved one or some other tragic event, and this is the context in its only two other occurrences in the NT (John 11:19, 31)."

3. Help the weak (**5:14**) – This probably refers to the spiritually weak, those who are struggling under the pressure of being a Christian in a pagan culture. It is our responsibility and duty to help them in their weakness; they are our brothers and sisters.

4. Be patient toward all (**5:14**) – In all their efforts to admonish, comfort, or help, and in whatever else they may do, they are to be patient with everyone. I. Howard Marshall states in *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 152, "Whoever may be the object of warning or help, the persons giving it must show the kind of patience which puts up with people and their awkwardness and even opposition to the helper."

5. See to it that no one repays evil for evil (**5:15**) – The community has a responsibility to see that none of its members acts this way. We are our brothers' keeper. Rather than paybacks, rather than seeking to injure, they must always pursue what is good for the other person.

6. Rejoice always (**5:16**) – This is a frequent injunction (Rom. 12:12, 15; 2 Cor. 6:10; Phil 2:18, 3:1, 4:4; 1 Pet. 4:13). Their blessing is so great that it should transcend any circumstance. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), and Paul elsewhere says the kingdom of God is a matter of joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

7. Pray constantly (**5:17**) – This is another common command (2 Thess. 3:1; Rom. 12:12; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2). This doesn't mean without interruption but without giving up, just like a faucet can said to drip constantly. Prayer is to be frequent and persistent.

8. Give thanks in everything (**5:18**) – They are to praise and thank God in whatever situation they find themselves. This is God's will for them in Christ. Even in adversity they know that God is working for the good of those that love him (Rom. 8:28), and they have an inheritance that transcends this world and its circumstances.

9. Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies (but test everything), hold firmly to what is good, keep away from every kind of evil (**5:19-22**).

a. The quenching of the Spirit against which Paul warns the Thessalonians is specified in the second clause. They are not to prohibit or stifle the exercise of the gift of prophecy. Rather, they are to test all alleged prophecies to discern whether they actually are prophecies, actually are words from God, and they are to hold

firmly to the messages that are good, meaning truly divine. Conversely, they are to keep away from, to reject, every kind of evil, referring most immediately to false prophecies.

b. The gift of prophecy was an important part of the first century church, but I do not believe that gift is still being given today.

(1) The gifts are given as the Spirit determines (1 Cor. 12:11), so he is free to cease giving one or more gifts as it suits his purpose to do so. It is evident from 1 Sam. 3:1, Ps. 74:9, and Lam. 2:9 that prophecy is not constant throughout history. Sometimes the gift is withdrawn. Judaism as a whole considered that prophecy had ceased since the time of Malachi (circa 430 B.C.). That is why intertestamental literature is not part of the OT canon.

(2) If the Spirit followed the old-covenant pattern, the gift of prophecy would be withdrawn after completion of the NT writings and their general recognition as the distinct body of inspired writings, that is, their acceptance as the NT canon. Ephesians 2:20 points in this direction when it speaks of the apostles and prophets playing a "foundational" role in the establishment of the church. The apostles and prophets were the instruments of God's new revelation (e.g., Eph. 3:4-5, 4:11), and as such, the church is built on the truth that was revealed through them. Since the apostles unquestionably passed from the scene early in church history (they must have seen the resurrected Christ: Acts 1:22-26, 1 Cor. 9:1-2; and Paul says he was the last one to do so: 1 Cor. 15:8), one would expect the same to happen to the prophets. That is implicit in the idea of a foundation. It is laid one time at the beginning of the structure; it is not continuously constructed.

(3) Historically, there is evidence of church leaders accepting the gift of prophecy into the second century, but by the third century a general consensus had developed that such gifts had ceased. In *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984), 87, scholar Ronald Kydd, himself a charismatic, summarizes his reading of the evidence as follows (emphasis supplied):

Generally speaking, and of course there must have been exceptions at specific places and times, the Church prior to A.D. 200 was charismatic.

However, in the first half of the third century, things change. We still find evidence that Latin-speaking Christians in the West were familiar with the gifts and open to unusual manifestations of God's presence. Nevertheless, we have to admit that even in the West there were Christians who were raising more than one eyebrow over the gifts. In the Greek East, we hear of only "traces" and we see that what people understand the gifts to be has changed. It is clear that the importance granted to the spiritual gifts was passing. This impression is heightened when we realize that a much lower proportion of Christian authors talk about the gifts in this period than before A.D. 200. The gifts just did not occupy the place in the life and thinking of the Church that they once had.

These three centuries saw dramatic changes in the Christian Church. *In the midst of all this, the gifts of the Spirit vanished.*

c. Paul does not say how the Thessalonians were to test the prophecies to discern whether they were genuine, presumably because they already knew how to do so. His advice here is similar to what he said in 1 Cor. 14:29, where it seems likely the spiritual gift of discernment (1 Cor. 12:10) was involved.

VII. Prayer for Thessalonians (5:23-24)

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your entire spirit, soul, and body be kept without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you is faithful; he will indeed do it.

A. The missionaries pray for the Thessalonians' complete sanctification, that God will bring them to complete goodness and dedication to his service and that they will be blameless at Christ's return (5:23). This is the same idea as the prayer of 3:11-13.

B. They are confident that God will do it (5:24).

VIII. Closing (5:25-28)

²⁵Brothers, pray also for us. ²⁶Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. ²⁷I charge you before the Lord that this letter be read to all the brothers. ²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

A. Paul solicits the Thessalonians' prayers for them (5:25). As Gary Shogren notes (p. 234), "Paul frequently asks his disciples to pray for him (e.g., Rom 15:30-32; 2 Cor 1:11; Col 4:3-4)." He knew the importance of the saints' prayers, and so should we.

B. He commands the saints to greet one another with a holy kiss (5:26). I do not understand this as a command to kiss. As Douglas Moo says in *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 926, "[t]he kiss was a common form of greeting in the ancient world generally and in Judaism especially." Paul *assumes* they'll greet by kissing but commands that it be a "*holy* kiss." He is saying, "The kiss with which you greet one another is to be holy," meaning a kiss that is a genuine expression of Christian love. The greeting is not to be duplicitous, as was the kiss that betrayed our Lord. If a commander wrote to his troops: "Greet President Trump with a respectful salute," his point would not be that they are to salute – that is a given – but that *when* they salute they do so with the respect that is due the office of President. However forms of greeting may change culturally, the greeting must remain holy.

C. Paul charges them, obligates them, to read the letter to all the brothers (and sisters) (**5:27**). This would be done in the assembly. Recall that in Col. 4:16 he directs the Colossians and Laodiceans to exchange their letters.

D. He concludes with a request for the Lord's grace to be upon them (**5:28**).