

Word & Spirit Bible Study Notes on 1 & 2 Thessalonians

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1 Thess 1:1-3

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

*²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,
³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Grace and Peace

The church in Thessalonica was founded very quickly. It was only a few weeks before Paul was driven out of town by angry Jews. In one sense it was a miracle that the few God-fearing Greeks and prominent women¹ who had converted to Christianity had managed to keep going. Paul writes this letter to encourage, teach and strengthen the church, after hearing a good report back from Timothy. That Silas and Timothy are also listed as co-authors shows Paul's commitment to working with others despite his own significant capabilities.

As was Paul's custom, his prayer for the Thessalonians is for *grace* and *peace*. They needed grace and peace especially if they were to keep going in a hostile environment. Paul, Silas and Timothy want to convey the fact that they are regularly praying for the Thessalonian believers with great thankfulness. The church does not survive by human effort, but it is God the Father and the Lord Jesus that are its source and sustainer of life.

Faith, Love, Hope

There are three things that Paul was particularly thankful for, and he doesn't just praise the Thessalonians to boost their egos or win them over, but to encourage them to *keep going* in these areas.

First, he gives thanks for their *work* which flowed from their *faith*. Theirs was not a passive faith – they put what they believed into action, working hard to see God's kingdom extended. Second, for their *labour of love*. Their love for God and for one another prompted them to serve diligently. Perhaps in particular, Paul has in mind a willingness to work hard at one's job in order to provide for the needs of others.

Finally, he rejoices in their *steadfastness* due to their *hope* in Jesus. With all the opposition they faced, they needed that certain hope in Jesus that goes even beyond the grave, believing that he would come again. Faith in God, love for others and hope for the future form a succinct description of the Christian life. Because the Thessalonians showed evidence of all three, Paul and his companions had good reason to be thankful for what God had already done, and confident about the future.

¹ See Acts 17:4

1 Thess 1:4-7

⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

Loved and Chosen

The amazing truth of the gospel is that we are loved and chosen by God. Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that even if they felt hated and rejected by others, God's view of them was one of complete acceptance and delight. This is where we find our sense of security, identity, and self-worth. God's opinion of us is what matters, not man's.

Word and Power

When the Thessalonians became Christians, it wasn't merely a rational response to a logical argument; God was powerfully at work in their hearts to convince them of the truth of the gospel. Here we see the Holy Spirit's role in both those preaching the gospel and those listening. Paul and his companions knew the power of the Spirit enabling them to proclaim the truth with full conviction, and the Thessalonians experienced the power of the Spirit at work in their hearts, causing them to welcome the message with joy.

Imitators and Examples

But their conversion experience wasn't the only evidence of true salvation. Their transformed lives were another proof of God at work. How did these new converts know what a godly life looked like? They learned how a Christian should live from the examples of Paul, Timothy and Silas. We should be aware that new believers will tend to copy us, so it is vital that we set an example worth following, and this will only be the case if we ourselves are modelling our lives on Jesus.

Perhaps the most remarkable evidence of grace in their lives was the joy in the Holy Spirit they demonstrated, even though they were suffering much affliction. Only a supernatural work of God can enable us to face hardships with joy. Because of their attitude, these new believers in Thessalonica, who themselves had learned from Paul's approach to suffering, were now the ones setting an example to the other churches in the surrounding region.

1 Thess 1:8-10

⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and 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 delivers us from the wrath to come.

Spreading the Word

The Thessalonians' joyfulness in the face of opposition made a big impact on everyone who came into contact with them. Their authentic Christian lifestyles were a witness to unbelievers and an encouragement to believers². They could have tried to stay out of trouble by maintaining a low profile and keeping quiet about their faith, but instead God's word "sounded forth" as they unashamedly lived out and shared the gospel.

Wherever Paul went he was hearing stories about the Christians in Thessalonica and how they had accepted the gospel and turned from idols. Perhaps in some places he didn't even need to do any evangelism because the Thessalonians had got there first.

Turning from Idols

When a person truly accepts the gospel, they are turning from idols to serve the living and true God. Idols are anything that take the place that belongs to God, things we look to for our security, happiness and identity. We need to identify the idols that we have been living for, and reject them in favour of serving God. This will involve dying to many of our old desires and ambitions, and our lives taking on a radically new direction, as we now live to fulfil the purposes of God.

Waiting in Hope

Becoming a Christian doesn't just bring us a new purpose in life; we also have a new hope that sustains us in adversity. Jesus, our risen and ascended Saviour, will one day certainly return. This return will be like a rescue, not so much from the difficult circumstances of life, but from the "wrath to come". This refers to the future day when God will judge the sin of humanity, which he is rightfully angered by. Jesus is our sure hope that we can be safe in that day, having purchased our forgiveness through his death and resurrection.

Armed with this hope, we, like the Thessalonians, will be able to endure the hardships we face in life. If God is for us, who could be against us?

² It is not entirely clear whether Paul is saying here that they shared the good news with unbelievers, or whether news of their faith became well known among believers. Probably both were true.

1 Thess 2:1-4

¹For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. ²But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. ³For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

What's the Point?

It can seem horribly unfair when a Christian devotes their life to spreading the gospel, and instead of everything going well for them, they face all kinds of suffering and difficulties. Paul had certainly faced his fair share of trouble as he travelled the Roman empire preaching the good news, but he and his companions confidently believed that their work was not pointless. They hadn't given up after their visit to Philippi where they had been beaten and thrown into jail. Things weren't any better in Thessalonica, where they were kicked out of town not long after arriving. And yet church they left behind was evidence that it had been worth it.

Entrusted with the Gospel

Paul knew that he had a calling on his life to preach the gospel, and so that was what he must do, irrespective of whether his message was received with open arms or whether he was chased out of town by an angry mob. His priority was not pleasing his hearers, but being faithful to the message God had entrusted him with. Of course, he wasn't trying to be rude or obnoxious, but the gospel message will always offend the proud and self-righteous.

No Hidden Agenda

Paul also wants to make it clear that he has no hidden agendas behind his gospel proclamation. He can say with a clear conscience that it is in obedience to God and for the benefit of the hearers, not to advance his own self-interest. Other people may judge his motives, but God is the one who truly sees the heart.

It is vital that all believers who want to spread the gospel live the sort of lives that are demonstrably full of integrity and kindness. Selfish ulterior motives in Christian leaders can cause immense damage to the credibility of the church. However, even if our motives are pure, there will be times when we are misunderstood or slandered, and we should take comfort from the fact that God sees and will reward our faithfulness to him.

1 Thess 2:5-8

⁵For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed--God is witness. ⁶Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. ⁸So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

Selfish Leadership

In this section, Paul writes about three dangerous traps that Christian leaders can fall into. First, they can be tempted to use flattery. Every preacher wants their audience to like them, and so the temptation is to try to win their favour by boosting their egos. But actually the gospel involves telling people that they are sinners who need to repent. We cannot leave this part out of the gospel even though it will prove unpopular – we must speak the truth in love.

Second, some leaders can be tempted to be greedy. The generosity of the new converts could all too easily be manipulated to enable Paul to get rich quick. Greed for money, sex and power have the potential to bring great damage to the cause of the gospel. Paul made sure he stayed well away, knowing that God knew his heart.

Third, they can be motivated by the desire to get praise and attention. Although Paul's apostleship was a very privileged and honourable calling, he was not looking for earthly recognition. What matters is not the approval of men. The only praise that really matters is that of God.

Loving Leadership

So in contrast to being a proud, flattering, greedy evangelist, Paul came in quite a different way. He was gentle and loving, like a mother is with her children. He wanted to protect these new believers and care for them in the early stages of their Christian life. Gentleness is a vital Christian virtue, especially for leaders who have to help or confront those in sin or in error.

The key to this was a genuine love for the Thessalonian believers that went beyond just wanting to add numbers to the church. Paul and his companions weren't just going to share the gospel but to share their lives. They were not aloof as leaders, but viewed themselves as part of the community they came to serve.

1 Thess 2:9-12

⁹For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ¹¹For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹²we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Blameless

The right of Christian leaders to earn a living from their work is something that is asserted in Scripture in many places. But although Paul believed in this right, he did not always take it. He wanted to be self-supporting while in Thessalonica, so that he could be a giver rather than a receiver. This is important in evangelistic contexts. Gospel preaching and appeals for money are not a good combination. Once people have submitted to the lordship of Christ and joined the church, then they should be taught the importance of giving. But the gospel is free and we should strenuously avoid giving anyone the impression that salvation needs to be purchased.

Paul and his colleagues wanted to ensure that not only God but the people around could see that they were behaving in a blameless manner towards these new converts. It greatly damages the cause of the gospel when Christian leaders are suspected of underhand tactics and ulterior motives.

Father-like

Unlike unscrupulous teachers who are just in it for the money, fathers educate their children purely out of love. Paul didn't only have the gentleness of a mother, but the earnestness of a father who is training up his son to be hard-working and honourable. This is why he needs to issue various commands, exhortations, and even rebukes. But they all flow out of a fatherly concern for the spiritual wellbeing of the Thessalonians.

He reminded these Christians that they should live in a manner worthy of their calling. We now have a new King and a new future, and our lives need to change dramatically to align with this new reality. To be part of God's kingdom means that we submit every part of our lives to his authority.

We have also been called into God's "glory". This is a reference to the transformation that has taken place through our salvation. As unbelievers, our lives had "fallen short" of the glory of God, but now the gift of the Holy Spirit within us enables us to fulfil God's original intention for mankind, displaying the image of God in ever increasing glory as we are changed into the likeness of Christ.

1 Thess 2:13-16

¹³And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. ¹⁴For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved--so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God's wrath has come upon them at last!

Accepting God's Word

We live in a world filled with conflicting opinions. It can sometimes be quite perplexing to determine who we should believe. The Thessalonians were hearing Paul say one thing, and the Jewish leaders say another. But Paul thanks God that they didn't just hear people arguing, but discerned the voice of God speaking to them through Paul. Realising this, they submitted to the word of God and allowed it to work in their hearts. We need to carefully weigh the teaching we hear as we listen to sermons and read books, and remain open to hearing what God has to say through them.

Rejecting God's Prophets

These new believers were not just open to learning from Paul's message, but also the example of the churches. The churches in Judea had stood firm in the face severe persecution, and were a source of inspiration to the Thessalonian Christians who were facing great opposition from the Jewish community.

Some people have accused Paul of being anti-Semitic in this passage as he is so strong in his condemnation of the Jews. But we must remember that Paul is a Jew himself. It was a great source of personal pain to him that his fellow countrymen were opposing God in such a way. Wherever he went he always proclaimed the gospel first to the Jews, but invariably they rejected it and he turned his attention to the Gentiles.

His criticism of them is serious. They have a national history of persecuting God's prophets, and when the Messiah came they killed him. Their attempts to silence the evangelistic efforts of the Christians amounts to a sin against humanity, as it hinders them from coming to salvation. They particularly didn't like the way that Christians were welcoming in the Gentiles to the faith so freely. Because of these things, the wrath of God is hanging over them, and indeed it was not long before the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, which was a clear sign of his judgment.

Of course that is not the final word for the Jews. There were many individual Jews who did accept the gospel message, and Paul held out hope that one day the nation as a whole would acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah.

1 Thess 2:17-20

17But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavoured the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, 18because we wanted to come to you--I, Paul, again and again--but Satan hindered us. 19For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20For you are our glory and joy.

Torn Away

It must have been so painful for Paul to have to flee the city of Thessalonica so soon after planting a church. Could such a new church survive on their own? But though he was no longer with them in person, he was very much with them in spirit, praying earnestly for them. And he was determined to find an opportunity to visit again to encourage and teach them, but he knew that initially it would not be possible due to the trouble his presence in the city would cause.

Paul puts the prevention of his return to Thessalonica down to Satan. Other times when he was prevented from going somewhere, he saw it as the Spirit's intervention. It is important that we remain determined to do things that are God's will, even in spite of Satanic opposition; but we must also have the discernment to understand when God is closing a door. In this case, Paul knew that it was the right thing to do to attempt to visit this young church who were enduring so much hostility.

Crown of Boasting

Paul believed that Christians' work would be judged at the coming of the Lord Jesus. The Thessalonian church was a source of great joy to him³, because it was evidence that he had devoted his life to something worthwhile. He had confidence that the Lord would be pleased with the work he had done in bringing the gospel to them. There is a wrong type of pride in our work for God, but we should rejoice in what God has accomplished through us. Our desire should be that we will not be ashamed on that final day, but there will be much evidence of a life of fruitful service to God.

³ Gordon Fee explains that the crown is a laurel wreath from the games. So Paul pictures the Thessalonians as his gold medal as it were. He is not just concerned that he personally finishes the race, but that he brings as many people across the finishing line with him.

1 Thess 3:1-5

¹Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labour would be in vain.

Endure Afflictions

Despite being prevented from meeting up with the Thessalonians personally, Paul did eventually manage to send Timothy. He held Timothy in very high regard as his co-worker in the gospel, but realised that his need of companionship was not as important as the Thessalonians' need for encouragement. Timothy's mission was to help establish them in the faith and urge them to stand firm in the face of their afflictions.

Although it may not seem an encouraging thought, Paul reminds them that suffering had been "destined" for them. He plainly warned them of this from the outset, so now that it had come they should not be disheartened. It is important to know that God is in control, and even when times are tough he still has a plan that cannot be thwarted.

Resist Temptation

Paul was particularly concerned that Satan, the "tempter", may have used these hardships to tempt the Thessalonians to give up on their stand for Jesus. Paul couldn't bear the thought that all they had done to start that church might end up being in vain. This is why by his prayers, letters and sending Timothy, he was doing all in his power to help them. When we see God begin a good work in someone else's life through our own service, we should not give up on them and leave them to it. We need to be willing to provide ongoing care and support so that they will become fully established in their faith.

All of us will face suffering and hardship at different times in our lives, and during those times we are vulnerable to the attacks of the devil who wants us to give up on our faith. He doesn't play fair, and he likes to strike us when we are down. This is why we need to be part of a church community who will love, support and encourage us to keep going through difficulties.

1 Thess 3:6-10

⁶But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you-- ⁷for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Good News

News travels fast these days, thanks to mobile phones and email, but for Paul there was an agonising wait for Timothy to return with news. Would there even be a church left in Thessalonica? Thankfully, he received good news: not only was their faith and love strong, but they still had great affection and respect for Paul, despite those who were slandering him. The news of their faithfulness was a great encouragement for Paul himself to keep evangelising in difficult places.

Supply What is Lacking

Paul is overjoyed at hearing Timothy's report and he directs that joy back to God in thanksgiving. However, he does not complacently assume that everything is fine, so he continues to pray that he himself would be able to go and help them. He uses the strange phrase "supply what is lacking in your faith", probably because Timothy had brought news of some problems and misunderstandings in the church. Despite their faith and love, they still had much to learn.

No church has arrived at a point of final maturity, and therefore churches need to beware of settling for the status quo, and press on in obedience to God's Word and experience of God's Spirit. Even well established strong churches can find themselves settling for mediocrity. The church still needs those like Paul, with an apostolic passion for the gospel and a pastoral heart for people, whose ministry of wisdom, encouragement and truth causes churches to grow into all that God intended for them to be.

1 Thess 3:11-13

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹²and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

A Prayer for Love and Holiness

Paul now moves to pray for the Thessalonians. His practice of including prayers in his letters gives a wonderful insight into how he prays for people, and should inspire us to pray in similar ways for those we know.

Paul's first prayer request is that he would be able to meet up with them again. Prayer is not just asking God to do things so that we don't have to, but also for him to open the way and enable us to do things for him. We should not ask God for things if we are unwilling to allow him use us to accomplish them.

Paul's second request is for their love for one another to increase. This is an area every believer needs to grow in, as we all struggle at times with those we find difficult, or simply with our own selfishness that gets in the way of sacrificially serving others. Love was going to be vitally important for the Thessalonian believers if they were to stick together and support each other through adversity.

He then prays that they will not only love one another, but love *all* people. Although there is a special bond of love between believers, we are also called to love our non-Christian neighbours. This is an especially hard challenge when we are persecuted or treated with disdain by unbelievers. But to be a follower of Jesus is to be a person who loves even their enemies.

Finally he asks that they will be blameless in holiness, so that on the day that Jesus returns, they can stand before the Father. Through Jesus, we have been declared righteous, but this does not mean that how we live is now irrelevant. Instead, we should be pressing on to become more like Jesus, blameless in every area of life. This is God's ongoing work of sanctification in us, which he accomplishes through the indwelling power of the Spirit, preparing us for Jesus' return.

The return of Jesus is described here as Jesus coming with all his "holy ones". This might be referring to believers who have already died, or it could be a reference to the angels. In either case, the picture is of Jesus returning with a company of the righteous, in order to meet his own holy and righteous people. His second coming is good news for all who truly belong to Jesus.

1 Thess 4:1-3

¹Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;

Live to Please God

The good news of the gospel is that God has shown us grace despite our failure to please him. However, this does not mean that how we live is unimportant. In fact, a key element of Paul's teaching was some very practical instruction on how a righteous, God-honouring life should be conducted. Every Christian's goal in life should be to please God, and so it matters that we understand what his will is for us.

Paul is encouraged that the gospel has already made a big difference in the lives of the Thessalonians, but he wants to encourage them to keep making progress. We should never feel we have 'arrived' at a level of holiness that does not need to be improved on. However long we have been a Christian for, there is always room to grow in godliness and spiritual maturity.

God's Will for Your Life

Given Paul's positive statements about the church in Thessalonica, it may surprise us to discover that they seem to have a problem with sexual immorality. It appears that for some of them at least, Christian standards of sexual behaviour seemed too restrictive for them, and they carried on behaving like the rest of their society.

But God's will is for all of us to be holy, and this must impact every aspect of life, including our sexuality. The instruction is simple: we are to abstain from sexual immorality. What God has prohibited, we should not do. Though this may involve a fierce battle against temptation, if we truly desire to please God, then by his grace and power we will be able to say no.

Like the Thessalonians, we are living in a society that is very permissive sexually, and this could tempt us to compromise or even to question what God's word teaches. But Paul makes it very clear that this teaching is not simply his own opinion. These commands come with the authority of Jesus himself, who is Lord of the church. And if we are to claim that he is Lord of our lives, then we must be willing to submit completely to his will.

1 Thess 4:4-8

³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Purity Matters

Why is it so important to be sexually pure? Isn't this an example of the church trying to control people and spoil all their fun? Paul gives several reasons in this passage why we should be pure.

First, our bodies matter. It is not just our spirits that are called to holiness, but our bodies too. Paul is realistic about the sexual urges and temptations we feel. Becoming a Christian does not make these magically disappear. So we will need self-control if we are to live according to God's standards.

Second, we should live as those who know God. The church often has a bad reputation for being judgmental towards unbelievers. But Paul is less concerned about how those who don't know God behave, and more concerned that those who profess to know him live in a way that accords with their profession of faith.

Third, sexual sin is a sin against our brothers. It is not the victimless crime it is often portrayed as. It is a sin that you drag someone else into. It has consequences that go beyond to those not directly involved. It can cause breakdown of marriages, can bring disgrace upon the church's witness, and leave emotional scars that are not easily healed.

Fourth, the Lord will judge sexual sin. Paul had solemnly warned the Thessalonians that God "avenges" sexual sin. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and so sexual sin is also a sin against God. This does not mean he is unwilling to graciously forgive sexual sin, but it does mean that in his love and holiness he often allows us to bear the painful consequences in order that we might be brought to repentance.

Fifth, our calling in life is to holiness. Our purpose before we became Christians may simply have been to please ourselves and indulge our own desires, but now we have a new goal and direction in life. If we are sexually immoral, we are actively working against God's good purposes for us.

Sixth, those who think this doesn't matter are ignoring God and silencing the voice of Spirit. To disobey in this regard is to blatantly disobey God himself. He has given us the Spirit in order that we might have the power to live holy and self-controlled lives.

Together, these reasons should convince us of the need to take seriously the Bible's teaching on sexual purity. As a church we should do all we can to help one another live in a radically counter-cultural way that honours God and obeys his Word.

1 Thess 4:9-12

⁹Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, ¹⁰for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, ¹¹and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, ¹²so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Love One Another

Though the Thessalonians may have needed a strong warning about sexual purity, they are here commended for their deep love for one another. It is called “brotherly love” because they treated one another as family, accepting one another and being willing to practically meet each other’s needs. Paul says that God himself has taught them to do this. Any person who has been born again and has the Spirit within them should expect to grow in love for others.

And their love went further than the bounds of their local church. It extended into the surrounding region, likely in terms of financial and practical provision for the needs of those Christians less well off. In the affluent West, it is important that this aspect of Christian love for our less well-off brothers and sisters in other places is put into practise.

Don't be Lazy

Even when we are giving practical help to the poor, we can be tempted to become complacent and even proud. Here, the Thessalonians are reminded that they should keep doing this more and more. It would seem that some in the church were not working for their keep, but being supported by people known as ‘patrons’ who met the needs of those who gave them honour and political influence. The Christians were not to sponge off rich people in this way, but to earn their own keep by their hard work.

This would not only make them more able to support those in need, but would also help the Christian community to win the respect of unbelievers. It would also help them avoid getting into compromised political situations. The way we handle ourselves in the work place, and the way we involve ourselves in the politics of our day will be closely observed by those around us. We must make sure that we don’t undermine our witness by behaving inappropriately.

When Paul says that they should work with their “hands”, he is not suggesting that only manual labour is an appropriate job for a Christian. He is however, warning against the sort of laziness where a person fully capable of working instead chooses to live off hand-outs from others. This is why he says that they should be “dependent on no one”. It is not that independence is a virtue. We all need other people. But spiritual maturity involves moving from being primarily a taker to being a giver.

1 Thess 4:13-15

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

Grieving with Hope

At this point in the letter, Paul starts to correct some misunderstandings about the return of Jesus. A number of the Thessalonian believers had died, and many in the church were deeply grieved. They had expected Jesus to return before any of them died, and now they are left wondering whether these departed brothers and sisters would miss out on eternal life.

What the Thessalonians need is to be instructed about what happens to Christians who die. Just as Jesus died and rose again, so God is also able to raise believers who die back to life. In fact, Paul describes these believers as merely having “fallen asleep” to highlight the temporary status that they are in. One day they will rise again, and we will see them.

This truth does not mean that grief is inappropriate when a believer dies, but it does mean that we can know hope despite our sorrow. For an unbeliever, death is cruel, bleak, and final, but we do not despair even in the face of this fiercest of enemies, because we know that Jesus has overcome it.

The Coming of the Lord

The way Paul talks in verse 15 would suggest that he was fully expecting Jesus to return in his own lifetime. He never claimed to know when Lord would return, but he was constantly prepared and expectant. This is the consistent New Testament message for believers concerning the second coming – you don’t know the date, so always be ready.

Those Christians who had died were in no way going to miss out on the glory and celebration of the second coming. In fact, they are destined to be right at the forefront of the triumphal procession on that day. So every believer can look forward to the second coming with joy and expectation, knowing that it is an event that they will not miss out on.

1 Thess 4:16-18

¹⁶For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. 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, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The Dead Will Rise

This passage has been the subject of much speculation about exactly how the sequence of end times events will pan out. But Paul's purpose here is not to provide a detailed plan, but to underline the fact that Christians who died were in no way going to miss out on the joy of the second coming. In fact, they would be at the forefront of it. This would be a source of comfort to those who were mourning over recent bereavements in the church.

The Lord's return will be a very loud and public event, with a shout that quite literally wakes the dead. It will be like a royal visit to a town in ancient times, where the ruler would be welcomed with loud celebrations and would arrive with a delegation of VIPs. In Jesus' royal return, the dead in Christ will be those VIPs. They will rise first, and only then will the rest of the church meet Jesus.

The Living Will Rise

This passage also talks about those who are living at the time of Jesus' return being caught up in the "air" and in the "clouds". It is not entirely clear how exactly this will take place. However, the picture of a royal visit being used in these verses points to the idea that having risen to meet Jesus, we will not return with him to heaven, but that he will continue on his journey to earth.

Confusion about end times matters has sometimes meant that Christians do not find as much hope in this future event as they should. When we are tempted to despair or give up during times of difficulty, the knowledge that the Lord will return reminds us that what we do for him is worth it. The sure hope of resurrection life after death will also bring confidence to boldly go wherever God is leading us, knowing that not even death itself can have victory over us.

1 Thess 5:1-5

¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.

Like a Thief

The question of when the second coming might take place has been a subject of fascination for many over the years. Perhaps some of the Thessalonians were wondering if Paul could give them some clues as to how soon it would be. Were they all going to die before this event took place? But Paul would not speculate – and wisely so, because Jesus had told his followers that no one knows the day or the hour.

The day will come suddenly and unexpectedly, just like a thief turns up without giving you any prior warning whatsoever. In fact, there will be people feeling very safe and secure, as though nothing could go wrong for them, and suddenly it will happen. For those who do not know Jesus, his return is not an occasion for joy, but the moment that judgment is upon them. It is like a woman who is pregnant, who knows that labour pains and giving birth are inevitable, even though she does not know exactly when they will begin.

Children of Light

Even though we do not know the date, we should not be surprised in the same way as non-Christians. We have been warned of the signs of the times, and we have been instructed to be ready. Though the exact moment is unknown to us, we can be prepared for Christ's return. There are two ways in which we need to prepare for that day.

First, we are to live as people of the light. By this Paul means that there should be a distinct difference between the way Christians live and the way those who are still in darkness live. If we really believe that Christ is coming soon to judge the world, we should live accordingly. In this way we will be ready whatever time he returns.

Second, the message of the imminent return of Jesus should provoke us to actively spread the gospel. Time is short and people need to hear the good news if they are to avoid "sudden destruction". Those who take the return of Christ seriously will devote themselves to mission.

1 Thess 5:6-11

⁶So then let us not sleep, as others do, 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 belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Ready for Action

Imagine a tennis player is waiting to be called onto court for an important match in a tournament. Would they be likely to get drunk and fall asleep during that time? No, they would be doing all they could to ensure they were prepared physically and mentally for what is coming. Paul's argument here is that since we know that Jesus is coming, we should strive to continually be ready. Some Christians are spiritually asleep, having become lazy and neglected God's call on their life. Other Christians become "drunk", having lost their self-control, and compromised morally.

Ready for Battle

The reason it is important to be sober and awake is that we are in a spiritual battle. Like athletes, soldiers too take care to be ready for action at any moment. This description of the armour of God isn't as developed as the one in Ephesians 6, but the focus here is on being protected by breastplate and helmet. The Christian who is not ready is vulnerable in battle.

The helmet and breastplate signify faith, hope and love; three qualities that should characterise every believer's life. The devil's strategy is often to undermine one of those three. He attacks the faith of some, causing them to doubt God's truth or goodness. He attacks the hope of others, causing them to despair about their future, and he attacks the love of others, causing them to fall in love with the world as their love for God grows cold. We cannot afford to let our guard down in any of these three areas.

Destined for Salvation

Paul has described the day of Christ's return as one of sudden destruction, but it is not fearful for us because we are not destined for wrath. God's righteous anger at our sin was all dealt with at the cross, and we are completely forgiven on the basis of Jesus' atoning death.

But the purpose of our salvation is more than just getting us out of trouble. We are saved in order to be united with Jesus. Paul includes both Christians who are still alive *and* those who have died here. He encourages the Thessalonians with the truth that not even death can separate us from the Lord. When a Christian dies they remain in the Lord's presence, and we can confidently look forward to a future reunion when we will live *together* with the Lord.

1 Thess 5:12-13

¹²We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Respect Your Leaders

One common cause of disunity in churches is a growing rift between the leadership and the rest of the church members. Here we are reminded of the importance of having a right attitude to those God has called to positions of leadership in the church. Paul argues that those in the church should respect their leaders, and gives three reasons.

First they are *hard working*, often doing many more hours work than a regular secular job might entail, while earning less or nothing at all. It is a labour of love, and they deserve respect for it, even if we would like them to do some things differently.

Secondly, they have *authority in the Lord*, meaning that we should acknowledge that Jesus himself has given these people as gifts to the church, and to despise them is to insult the giver of the gift.

Third, they *admonish*, meaning that they are called to spur people on to faith and obedience, and even to correct where necessary. We should not resent them doing this, as it is an important part of their job which requires great courage for them to fulfil.

Love Your Leaders

Not only are we to respect our leaders, but to hold them in the highest esteem in love. In fact, it is because we love them that we respect them, not because they are the best in their field, or because they do things just the way we like it. Ultimately, our unity is to come from the love that we have for one another, despite the different ideas and preferences we all have.

Having love and respect for your leaders is a sign of spiritual maturity, and is a powerful contribution towards peaceful and harmonious relations in the church. It will help the church to stand firm against the devil who loves to destroy churches by making them fight internally against themselves.

1 Thess 5:14-15

¹⁴And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Be Patient with Everyone

We have seen how important it is for the members of the church to respect those in leadership, but now we come to see how those who lead, and in fact all who are spiritually mature, should serve others in the church. There are three groups of people who will need help, and each must be treated in a way appropriate to their need.

First, those who are *idle* must be admonished. Their witness is spoiled and they are not serving the church by their unwillingness to work hard in their jobs or in the church. Of course we must admonish in love, but it is not loving to leave these people unchallenged. A word in season is what is needed to turn these people into profitable servants of the church, mightily used by God.

Second, those who are *fainthearted* should be encouraged. Don't assume people are being idle, when in fact they may be struggling though fear and adversity. Given the right encouragement to keep going and to have faith, they have great potential to use their gifts to build the body of Christ.

Third, those who are *weak* need to be helped. Not everyone in a church is in a position to serve, and those who are not should be lovingly supported as they work through their problems.

We may become frustrated with people who fall into these three categories, as they need a lot of input without giving much back, but we are told to *be patient* with everyone. God will reward our kindness to these people, and in many cases, those who were dependent on help will eventually move to being those who help others.

Do Good to Everyone

What must never be allowed to happen in the church, no matter how difficult some people are, is for us to start paying back evil with evil. We should continue to serve each other in love even when the other does not deserve it. This means we should make it our deliberate intention to do as much good to other people in the church as possible. In fact, here Paul broadens the scope and includes unbelievers - we are to show the same serving attitude to those outside the church as we are called to for those inside.

All of this cuts against the grain of how we normally behave. We would rather spend time with the strong, hard-working and bold, rather than supporting the weak, timid and idle. We would rather do good only to those who are good to us, rather than to those who have wronged us. But God has shown us mercy, and we should show mercy to these people too.

1 Thess 5:16-18

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Keep Rejoicing

In these verses, Paul outlines three activities that Christians should be constantly involved in. He does not mean that we are actively doing these things every second of the day, but that they should be constantly characteristic of us, done at every opportunity and on every occasion.

The first activity is *rejoicing*. Even in times of hardship we still have much to be glad about. The blessings both present and future that God has given us should be the cause of great joy, and provoke us to worship. We can only fulfil this command if we are kingdom minded people. If our hearts are set on the things of this world, then we will be often miserable that we don't have all we want. But if we fix our eyes on Jesus, reminding ourselves of God's great love for us, and his good intentions towards us, then we cannot help but become joyful people.

Keep Praying

The second activity is *praying*. We should not think of prayer as just something for one or two set times during the day, but as something that should characterise our lives. Throughout each day we should be praying prayers of praise, as well as asking for help and guidance for ourselves and others. By doing this we will experience the nearness of God, and see him at work in our daily lives more and more.

The command to pray without ceasing also reminds us of Scripture's exhortations not to give up in prayer. There are times when God does not immediately grant our requests, for he has bigger purposes for us. As we persist in prayer, we draw closer to God and learn to surrender our will to his.

Keep Giving Thanks

Finally, we are to keep on *giving thanks*. This is easy enough when things are going well, but we are called to remain grateful in all circumstances. Many people have an attitude of entitlement, assuming they deserve a life filled with good things, and become filled with bitterness and complaining when they don't get what they want. Instead, we need to cultivate an attitude of gratefulness, recognising that all the good things we have are due to God's grace. This will enable us to be joyful even in trials as we thank God for the blessings that no adverse circumstances can rob us of. Rather than focussing on the problem, we focus on the God who can do all things.

People whose lives are characterised by prayer, rejoicing and thanksgiving will be happy people, and people who can be used greatly by God. In fact, we are told that doing these things is God's will for our lives. Sometimes we can focus so much on the specifics of exactly where God wants us to live or the exact job or ministry he wants us to do, that we forget that his will is very much focused on what sort of person we are becoming. A life that is in the centre of God's will is one of rejoicing, praying and gratefulness.

1 Thess 5:19-22

¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.

Don't Quench the Spirit

All Christians would claim that they want to embrace all the Holy Spirit wants to do in their lives and churches, and yet we are warned here that it is possible for us to “quench” the Spirit. Like a fire, the Holy Spirit is powerful and unpredictable, and this can make us feel uncomfortable or fearful when he is at work. But we must allow him to have his way, or we rob ourselves of the many blessings he wants to bring.

Particularly in view here is our attitude to prophecy, which is when God speaks through someone to bring encouragement or guidance to those in the church. Because this gift can be misused, it is possible to be critical or cynical towards it, or even closed to it altogether. But God has given this gift for our good, and therefore we must be willing to embrace it. This does not mean an uncritical acceptance of everything that purports to be prophecy. Paul is quite clear that we should test prophecies, but this can only be done if we allow them to be brought in the first place.

Test Everything

It is not just prophecies that are to be tested; we should test everything, looking for what is good and rejecting what is evil. To do this we must be people who know God's word really well, as it is the standard against which we test everything. We will also need the spiritual gifts of wisdom and discernment. Together these allow us to test prophecies, discerning whether they are from God or not. They also allow us to test other things in life, such as decisions about what we should or should not do.

We are to abstain from every form of evil, meaning not just that we will avoid it in its most obvious guises, but that even when we detect it in a subtle way, we will stay away. Anything that comes from God will do us good, but sin and error are spiritual poison, and we should refuse to embrace anything evil if we want to remain spiritually healthy.

By contrast, when we find things that are good, we will hold fast to them, and cherish them, not allowing other people's disdain or criticism to put us off. This means that when God does speak to us through a genuine prophetic word, we should respond to it in faith and obedience, knowing that he has given it to us for our good.

1 Thess 5:23-24

²³Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Sanctified and Blameless

As the letter draws to a close, Paul prays a final prayer for the Thessalonian believers. His desire is that they would be completely sanctified, and blameless in every way. But rather than telling them to try harder, he entrusts this work to God in prayer. Sanctification is actually God's work; he is the one who works holiness in us.

In speaking of spirit, soul and body being blameless, we are reminded that holiness affects every part of life – our thoughts, emotions, attitudes as well as our actions and words. We should regularly examine ourselves with the light of God's word and with openness to the conviction of the Spirit, to see if he is highlighting anything that needs attention.

The reminder that Jesus is coming should make us all the more eager to be found as holy people, ready to welcome him without shame. God is working to prepare us for the return of Jesus, to live in a new world where sin has been abolished and holiness is the only way of life.

God has not called us to a life that we are not able to live, but he is faithful and will certainly work in those he has called. This lifts the pressure off of us, to somehow strive to attain the impossible, but allows us to rest in the knowledge that God's grace and power are enough for us to endure and overcome every difficulty we face. Our role is to cooperate with what God's Spirit is doing within us.

1 Thess 5:25-28

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

Final Requests

We have seen that Paul prayed regularly for the Thessalonians, but he was also deeply aware of that he needed others to pray for him. We should not be too proud to ask for prayer, but realise that however spiritually mature we may be, we are in need of the prayers of others to sustain us in times of difficulty.

He also tells them to greet one another with a holy kiss. Although for us this is a bit culturally strange, the point is that there ought to be genuinely warm affection between believers. Our meetings should not be characterised by cold but polite 'hello's, but with expressions of sincere love and care for one another.

They are also strongly urged to ensure that everyone gets to hear the letter. Paul wants it to be read aloud to the church. The reading of Scripture is something that is not an optional extra if we have some free time, but something that every believer should make space for in their lives, and every church should make space for in their meetings. It is God's primary means of speaking to us, and to sideline the Scripture is to silence the voice of God.

Finally, the letter ends on a note of grace. It is by the grace of Jesus that we are saved, and it is also by the grace of Jesus that we are strengthened and sustained to live in obedience to him, whatever difficulties and trials we may face. Let us learn to receive and appreciate the Lord's grace, as well as to be those who bring it to others.

2 Thess 1:1-4

¹Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

⁴Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

Growing

Here we have another letter sent by Paul with the help of Timothy and Silas to the Thessalonian church. This was a church that had been planted very quickly as Paul had been hounded out of town by persecution. However, the Thessalonian believers had not fallen away, and were now an established church. As was his custom, Paul expresses his desire that they would know God's grace and peace with them in their difficult situation. He is joyful about the good report he has heard about them, which results in him thanking God, and encouraging other churches with the story of their faith.

First, they were *growing*. They were significantly growing in faith. It is possible for our faith to weaken if we do not exercise it, but they were clearly living by faith all the time, and so learning to trust God more and more. Also their love for one another was increasing. They genuinely cared for each other's needs, and demonstrated it in practical ways. As Christians, we should never be complacent about the level of love and faith in our lives, but be constantly seeking to grow in both these areas. As with faith, love grows by expressing it. We learn to love people as we give ourselves in service to them.

Enduring

Second, they were *enduring*. In fact, the story of the way they were steadfast despite persecution and affliction was an inspiration to other churches. Paul made sure he told the news about them wherever he went, to inspire other Christians to follow this good example. They were not only steadfast, but also full of faith in God that he would sustain and protect them throughout. All of us will face times of hardship in life, and it is helpful for us to be inspired by the godly examples of those who have suffered much but yet trusted in God.

2 Thess 1:5-10

⁵This is evidence of the righteous judgement of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering-- ⁶since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Righteous Judgment

The Thessalonians were enduring harsh persecution, but here they are reminded that God sees their faithfulness and wants to reward it, and that he will punish those who are against them. When God judges, it is not because he has lost his temper, but it is an outworking of his righteous justice. He is in full possession of all the facts; he knows what everyone has done, and why they have done it. Paul explains here that God's justice is also fitting; it is a punishment that fits the crime.

God's justice and his mercy are not in competition against one another; he gets glory for himself whichever he demonstrates. However, we are in a season of mercy at the moment, in which God is withholding final judgement, allowing as many as possible to be saved. This means that for now, some evil goes unpunished, and the Thessalonians must await their relief from suffering.

Final Judgment

The time this will happen is at the final return of Jesus, which will be relief for those who are persevering though suffering for the gospel, but will be terrible for those who have not accepted the gospel. The destruction they face is described as eternal, and away from the presence of the Lord. Whatever physical pain may be experienced in hell, the real punishment is the torment of irreversible exclusion. Having rejected Jesus, the only means of entering heaven, they must remain eternally outside. This sobering thought should inspire us to be grateful for our salvation, and to be earnest in our evangelism.

For believers, the second coming will be an awesome experience, in which Jesus alone will be glorified, for his saving and sanctifying work in our lives. We will stand in astonishment at the glorious grace we have been shown, something that now we can only begin to grasp.

The reason Paul tells the Thessalonians all this is not so they can be experts on the end times, but to encourage endurance and hope. If the return of Christ is something we understand and eagerly anticipating it will affect how we respond to suffering and persecution, and it will affect the choices we make about how we live our lives.

2 Thess 1:11-12

¹¹To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, ¹²so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Worthy of His Calling

If you have been entrusted with a very important job, you will naturally make a special effort to do it well. You want to show that you were worthy of being given such a task. We should feel the same about our lives as Christians. We are immensely privileged to be called to be the people of God, and so we should make every effort to live in a way that is worthy of our calling. But this does not happen automatically, and Paul knows this, so he prays constantly and fervently for the Thessalonians that they will grasp the importance.

How do we live a life worthy of God? It includes resolving in our hearts to do what is good, and stepping out in works of faith. In other words, it is very practically a life of obedience to God and trust in God. We find out what pleases him, and seek to do it. We find out his will for our lives, and seek to obey it. But we are not left alone in this. It is God himself who enables us to fulfil the resolutions we make, and it is God who empowers us for the works of faith he calls us to. A life worthy of God is not an impossibly high ideal; by his Spirit he enables us to become what we are called to be.

Glorifying Jesus

The purpose of such a lifestyle is to bring glory to the name of Jesus. Our lives have as much capacity to bring glory to Jesus as our songs of worship do. When we live in dependence on God and in obedience to him, he is glorified. Our words and our actions must match up if we are to be true worshipers who give God the honour he deserves.

Paul has mentioned twice in recent verses (verse 10 and 12) that not only are we to glorify Jesus, but that he is glorified in us. The very fact of our transformed lives is intended to display the glory of Jesus to the world. We are intended to be the public demonstration of the grace of God. This is why it matters that we live worthy of his calling. Our good works and acts of faith are intended to glorify God and draw others towards his grace.

2 Thess 2:1-4

¹Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ²not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

Don't be Deceived

The New Testament repeatedly warns us that there will be false teachers and false prophets that we need to beware of. Not everyone claiming to be expounding the Bible or speaking by the Spirit should be believed. The Thessalonians were being confused by some who were teaching that the day of the Lord had come. These people were behaving deceitfully, pretending to be speaking under a spirit of prophecy, or even forging letters from Paul.

But the Thessalonians were not to be taken in by this, because they had already had teaching on the end times that should have helped them to discern the falsehood of these reports. It is vitally important that we have a good grasp of what Scripture teaches, so that we are not easily duped by false teaching.

The Man of Lawlessness

So what should the Thessalonians have remembered about the day of the Lord? First, there would be a rebellion – possibly referring to a great apostasy or even wave of persecution of the church. This might be what is called elsewhere the “great tribulation”⁴.

Second, the “man of lawlessness” would be revealed. This man is probably the same as the “antichrist”⁵ - one who would arrogantly set himself up as the highest ruler, taking the very place that only God himself should hold. He will not only demand worship, but will refuse to allow worship directed to anyone or anything else. Like Daniel experienced when a law was passed against prayer, this will be a time when believers find themselves under sustained pressure.

These pieces of information give us a tantalising glimpse of what is to come in the end times, without filling in all the details that we would like. The important practical points are that the second coming will not be a private or missable event, and that we should be prepared to faithfully endure in days when there will be opposition to the Christian faith. This is the focus of all the New Testament teaching on the end times – not to satisfy our curiosity, but to provoke us to make sure we are prepared.

⁴ See, for example, Matt 24:21, Rev 7:14

⁵ See 1 John 2:18

2 Thess 2:5-8

⁵Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. ⁷For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. ⁸And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

Mystery of Lawlessness

Have you ever overheard one side of a telephone conversation that sounded really interesting, but you were left wondering what was being said in the bits you can't hear? This passage is a bit like that. While he was in Thessalonica, Paul gave some in depth teaching on the end times, and so he only summarises it here, without filling in all the missing details we want. The point here is not to give new information, but to remind them of what they had already been taught. How could they have been fooled by the false teachers when it so obviously contradicted what they knew already?

Paul speaks here of the "mystery of lawlessness" and the "man of lawlessness". Lawlessness is the rejection of God, and his right to rule over us and define our morality. Clearly "lawlessness" has always been present in human societies, and there have been many times in human history when evil has been particularly rampant.

Nevertheless, the full degree of lawlessness is in some way being restrained at the present time. Who or what exactly that is restraining it in this passage is unclear. But ultimately of course, the timetable of end times events is determined by God. Whatever needs to be moved out of the way will be done so only when the time is right.

The Man of Lawlessness

Although it may not always feel like it, we are currently living in a time of opportunity and mercy, where the devil's operations are limited and the gospel can be preached. But eventually the lawlessness will not be restrained anymore and the man of lawlessness will appear, who will lead humanity in rebellion against the rule of God.

The good news is that reign of the man of lawlessness will be short-lived. The end of this age will come, and Jesus will return bringing both salvation and judgement. Paul does not picture a fierce struggle between Jesus and the antichrist. There is no struggle whatsoever – simply Jesus' breath and radiant appearance will completely destroy the man of lawlessness and show up all that he had achieved for what it really is.

What are we to make of this? It would be foolish to speculate too much on exactly how this will all come to pass. If we really needed all the details, God would have put them in the Bible for us. Rather, this should be a reminder to all who live in peaceful and prosperous times that we shouldn't be complacent, but get on with the job of evangelisation, being ready for persecution or for the return of Christ. A right understanding of the end times will motivate us to put our heart and soul into the work of the kingdom rather than idle speculation.

2 Thess 2:9-12

⁹The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, ¹²in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Deceived

At key moments in our lives we face crossroads – times when the decisions we make can radically affect the course of our future. When a person is confronted with the gospel they must decide whether they love the truth, or love unrighteousness. To embrace the truth is the path to salvation, but to reject it is the path to condemnation. Paul warns here that those who refuse to believe the truth are in danger of becoming entrapped in a state of delusion.

This may seem unfair to us. Does God deliberately allow people to be deceived by the lawless one in order that they may miss out on salvation? The fact is though that none of us deserve salvation. All of us, left to our own devices would freely choose unrighteousness. The reason we reject the truth is because we find its moral demands unpalatable. We need God to miraculously change our hearts and draw us to himself if we are to embrace the truth.

False Signs

In the end times, the phenomenon of people rejecting the gospel and getting caught in bondage to deception will increase, because the man of lawlessness will use false signs and wonders to lure people into following him. We are repeatedly warned in the New Testament that power and miracles are not sure signs of the Spirit of God. We should discern whether people are true servants of God by the content of their character and teaching, rather than simply being impressed by power.

The antichrist is called the “lawless one”, because he has rejected the rule of God and set himself up as the highest authority. In fact, lawlessness is another word for sin as John tells us. Satan’s great sin was his proud rebellion against God, and this evil person will be the embodiment of all that Satan stands for.

2 Thess 2:13-17

¹³But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first-fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

Sanctified and Glorified

All this talk of the man of lawlessness and people caught in deception might seem discouraging, but there is still much to be thankful for. There are many people who God will save, and the Thessalonians are the first-fruits of a much greater harvest, of which we are a part.

We receive blessing from all three members of the Trinity when we become believers. We are dearly loved by the Lord, chosen by God, and sanctified by the Spirit. The gospel is more than simply salvation from judgement, but God intends for us to obtain the glory of Jesus. This means that God will transform us into something beautiful and glorious, fully reflecting all that he intended for us to be and people made in his image. As Christians we should expect to be progressively transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

Comforted and Established

So Paul closes this section with an exhortation and a prayer for the believers. He first wants them to stand firm, holding on to the traditions they had been taught. We should be people who are not easily thrown off course by strange teaching, but continuing in the truth of the gospel that we received. This means we need to be people who know God's Word well, in order that we can test the things that we are taught.

Paul's prayer is that the Thessalonian would know God's comfort and hope sustaining them. They need to remain steadfast in commitment to the good works they are doing and the truth they are holding to. The secret to doing this lies in their ability to grasp how much God loves them and how full of grace he is towards them. When we understand God's love and grace for us, it strengthens us to carry on, even when things are difficult.

2 Thess 3:1-5

¹Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured, as happened among you, ²and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. ³But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ⁴And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. ⁵May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Pray for us

Often when you are saying goodbye to someone you love, perhaps in person or perhaps on the phone, you end up taking a lot longer than you intended. Paul has been trying to finish his letter, but can't help himself carry on expressing prayers for and giving final instructions to this church that he had such deep affection for.

Paul is a firm believer in the power of prayer. He not only prays regularly for the believers in the churches he has planted, but he is not too proud to ask for prayer himself. Not surprisingly his primary request is that the gospel would reach many places and be well received – the passion of Paul's life. In spreading the gospel he regularly put himself in great danger, but he was neither fearful nor fatalistic about it. He wanted prayer for protection, as he knew the devil would be at work inciting opposition.

The Lord is Faithful

For Paul to keep putting himself in the firing line by taking the gospel into hostile environments may seem like madness, but he could do it because he was convinced of the faithfulness of God. Ultimately, it is God's faithfulness rather than our own strength that enables to withstand the attacks of the enemy. This is why Paul felt so confident about the Thessalonian believers that they would keep living in obedience to God, and remain devoted to him.

Paul prays two things for the Thessalonians. First, that they would have *the love of God*. This must always remain priority number one for Christians, that we maintain a close relationship with God, knowing his love for us, and desiring him above all else. Second, that, they would have *the steadfastness of Christ*. Jesus was of course the ultimate example of steadfast endurance, as he went to the cross to make a way for us to be saved. By the power of the Spirit, we too are enabled to follow the example of Jesus as we live out the callings God has placed on our lives. We can expect a battle, but we should not expect defeat, as God will faithfully and graciously equip us with all we need to overcome.

2 Thess 3:6-9

⁶Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.

Don't be Lazy

There are many people in our society who would love to have a job, but for health reasons or lack of employment opportunities, find themselves having to rely on state benefits instead. Others work hard in the home or in voluntary work without receiving financial compensation. However, there are also some people who could work, and ought to work, but instead are taking advantage of handouts and generosity from others, and refusing to take the responsibility and initiative to provide for themselves. One way this was possible in Thessalonica was the "patron-client" system, where rich people would support poor people in return for being made to seem important.

In this passage, Paul makes it clear that he takes a dim view of those who could work but choose not to. They are being idle, and this is an inappropriate way for a Christian to spend their life. In fact the word idle means more than just laziness, but being generally out of order, refusing to conform to the standards of God's word.

Paul himself had been so keen to avoid appearing as a sponger that he took on a part time job to pay for his ministry expenses. This meant that he did not require financial support from the new converts during his mission there. This was not because he didn't believe that evangelists or pastors should receive a salary, but to demonstrate the principle that Christians are willing to work hard for the sake of the gospel. He also was able to avoid giving the impression that he was just in it for the money.

The Thessalonians are warned about keeping company with Christians who are idle. These people are lazy in their regular work, and lazy in their kingdom work. They were becoming a corrupting influence on the rest of the church. What's more, these people had drifted from the apostolic tradition in other ways too. As Christians we are to be those who work hard both in our daily business and in the work we do for the Lord. We should, like Paul seek not to be a burden to others, but to pull our own weight so that we have something to offer those in genuine need.

2 Thess 3:10-12

¹⁰For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Willing to Work

The Bible repeatedly calls us to show God's compassion to the hungry by feeding them and providing for their needs. But what do we do when it comes to people who could quite easily feed themselves? Should we turn them away? This passage doesn't directly address this question, but it does set down a very clear standard of behaviour for Christians. Every member of the church is expected to be a worker, whether or not they are in paid employment. Instead of draining resources by constantly demanding help and support, it should be our goal but to be supply resources for kingdom ministry. This means that the church can focus its generosity on those who genuinely need it.

In the Thessalonian church there were some people who didn't have jobs and relied on the generosity of others for their support. This would be fine if they were working hard for the kingdom, but they weren't. In fact they were meddling and interfering, causing more work and trouble for others. These people should not be given a free lunch. Instead they must be firmly commanded and lovingly encouraged. They ought to do their work quietly – in other words, not being troublemakers, and to earn their own living.

Christians who can't earn a living should be supported, and anyone who is in need should be shown compassion. But the church is not obligated to provide handouts to those who claim to be Christians but don't live in an appropriate way. Selfishness and self-indulgence are at the root of this lazy behaviour, which is incompatible with being followers of Jesus who are called to selflessly giving themselves in love for others.

2 Thess 3:13-18

¹³As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

¹⁶Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. ¹⁷I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. ¹⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Don't Grow Weary

Have you ever reached the point of asking “why do I bother”? Maybe you have been trying to do the right thing and all it seems to bring is trouble and criticism. It feels like life would be less stressful if we simply gave up and took the easy option instead. The Thessalonians may well have been tempted to think like this. They were zealously serving God, and were getting persecuted for it. But Paul urges them not to throw in the towel. No matter how hard the fight, God is able to strengthen and refresh us to enable us to keep going to the end.

Sadly it seems that some had already given up, finding Paul's teaching too difficult to follow. Now there was real danger that these people's compromise and spiritual lukewarmness would spread throughout the fellowship. Firm action needed to be taken, which in some cases would need to go as far as excluding people from the church. But this wasn't designed to get rid of them altogether – quite the opposite. These people are not to be thought of as enemies but brothers, and so it wasn't just the one who was excluded feeling shame, but the ones who remained felt pain also. Those who receive church discipline must be left in no doubt of the love that we feel towards them and the desire that they be reconciled.

Grace and Peace

Paul's closing prayer for the Thessalonians is that they would know the peace, presence and grace of God. These are the resources God wants to bestow on every believer in order to sustain us through whatever difficulties we face in life.

Paul also closes this letter with his own signature, as a mark of genuineness. It serves as a reminder that throughout church history, Satan has sought to attack the truth through false teaching. It does matter that we discern what is genuinely from God and what comes from another source. But our task goes beyond merely discerning truth from error. Having heard God's word in these letters to the Thessalonians, we need to put it into action.