

# 1 THESSALONIANS COMMENTARY

It is believed that this epistle was among the earliest written by Paul. There is no confirmation within the text itself as to the time and place of the writing, but it would appear from the account in Acts that it was written during the latter part of Paul's stay in Corinth (AD 49-51), during his second missionary journey. Some pinpoint the time of the writing in the early summer of AD 51. The letter is written out of practical concern for the spiritual journey of the Thessalonians.

Paul's stay there had been brief. Acts 17:2 mentions a three-week duration to his ministry in the synagogue there, and it seems likely that his stay there was only a matter of a few months. As in the case of all the cities and towns he preached in, it was no small matter to establish a healthy church with solid leadership in such a short period of time. Paul's concern seemed to be that a misunderstanding regarding Jesus' return could cause them to think and live wrongly. It was not that they should not count on His return. In fact, each chapter ends with the statement about this coming event. But they needed to be instructed more precisely about it. The result is that in both epistles to Thessalonica we find precise information about the return of Jesus.

But we have more than that. We have a series of commands and exhortations about very practical matters. Paul charges the readers with things that bring order to relationships, to work, to finance, to resolving conflict. This is set in the context of strong teaching on Jesus' return as being that upon which our hopes are based. His return is stated as a certainty. But that does not mean we can be slack about the order and mission we have been summoned to. It is held before the readers as what they are to be pre-occupied with, not as their hope but as their duty and that which will be rewarded.

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# 1 Thessalonians 1

**1:1 “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; grace to you and peace.”**

Paul represents this letter as being from himself and two other individuals. He did this because these two other men were known to all the Thessalonians and likely would be an ongoing voice in their lives. From our perspective we view Paul as the chief authority of the early church, and the two other individuals as his assistants. However, from a first century perspective Silvanus, called Silas in Acts, was a man of considerable standing. This is evidenced by the fact that the apostles chose him along with an individual named Judas to accompany Paul in the work of disseminating their official words to Gentile believers (Acts 15:22-35). The impression one gets from the account in Acts 15 is that the presence of Silas and Judas would lend credibility to Paul and Barnabas.

We must remember that at this point in early church history Paul was regarded with some suspicion by Jewish Christians. Silas, the man with the strong prophetic gift (Acts 15:32), would provide definitive linkage both to the parent church in Jerusalem, and to the rest of the apostolic company (1 Peter 5:12). Timothy, of course, is more well-known to us being mentioned in many of Paul's writings. At this time Timothy would have fit more in the classic role of assistant, being the more recent member of the apostolic company (Acts 16:1-3).

The Thessalonians are addressed as being together “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” That is important to hang onto. It is the reality of the entity of the church. It must not become just an organization to us. There is a sense in which we join it. But in a greater sense it is God that joins Himself to us, and that is the essence of what the church is.

The church is first and foremost a collection of people whom God has joined Himself to. In Paul's thought it was both local and universal, an institution and an organism. We must not fall into thinking that depreciates either of these. We believe in local churches because they are the nuts and bolts of the universal church. The thought that one can embrace and value the universal Church without embracing and serving the local church is not only deficient. It is a great lapse in judgment and understanding.

Paul's official greeting is this: “Grace to you and peace.” That short statement captures the pragmatic value of the gospel. The gospel is the foundational truth that when embraced, allows one to enter into a growing experience of divine help and comfort. The blessing that Yahweh wishes to bring into our lives in a fallen world is Himself, His own Spirit in us throughout the days of our lives. This is made possible through the sacrifice of Christ. It provides grace for us until in the plan of Yahweh Jesus Christ crushes the head of the evil one. Until then, Yahweh's great grace makes for our great peace.

**1:2 “we give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers;”**

In Paul's letters we find that the welfare of the people of God gave him considerable anxiety (Galatians 1:6; 2 Corinthians 2:1-4; 11:28). We also find verses like this that show that the people of God gave Paul much joy. The spiritual leader will find both in the

rigors of ministry, and both in their own way must be moderated. The anxiety must be mitigated by the strong conviction of God's great strength and power. The joy must be celebrated by the awareness that we are in a battle and there are casualties. Either way a leader's prayers are an important means through which God strengthens them, regardless of which end of the emotional spectrum they are on. Thankfulness for the faithful ones, and the verbalization of that thankfulness for them is an important thing to God, to oneself, and to the faithful.

There are churches and ministries that go very well from the opening bell. There are others that are laborious and troubled-filled. This is a mystery. Both are represented in the epistles of Paul. Difficulty in ministry is not as simple as pointing at leadership, nor is it as simple as pointing at bad hearts. There are obstacles and barriers that are easily recognizable and that must be dealt with. There are others that remain unknown. We are left with a very simple understanding we must be faithful, that "success" is variously defined, and that there are dynamics to spiritual work that are unknown to us.

There are things that Paul will identify in the verses that follow that inspired the thankfulness mentioned in this verse. These were things he saw and recognized in the Thessalonians that were noteworthy and appreciated. He longed to see these produced in other places. They are the kinds of things leader's love to see in those they lead and provide a wonderful list of things which Christians everywhere should aspire to.

**1:3 "constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father,"**

Paul names three things that constantly stood out in his memory of the Thessalonians. He uses three action words work, labor, and steadfastness. Each quality is admirable. As admirable as these actions are the motives that inspired them in the Thessalonians make them even more admirable.

The Thessalonians work was prompted by faith. There is much work in religious circles that is inspired by lack of faith. It is done to curry the favor of God, or it is done because God is not trusted to do any work Himself. The Thessalonians were working because they believed in the truth. Its urgency inspired them to act. The new potential of their effort, the fact that it would be greatly multiplied by the Holy Spirit, inspired them to invest heavily. They were inspired by their belief that obedience was right and would be rewarded. We should be inspired to act by the truth, not by fear.

The Thessalonians worked, but also labored. The word used here comes from a word meaning to chop. It implies hard, intense, painful effort. It is used elsewhere not only of labor, but of trouble (Galatians 6:7; Luke 18:5). There is much that can inspire this kind of labor. A person could be motivated by hard work itself, particularly its potential to make a statement about them. In that case their hard work covers a kind of arrogance. They want to be known as a spiritual "Iron Man". There are many who turn to hard work as a fleshly means of gaining affirmation. The Thessalonians were motivated by love, pure and simple. Though Paul does not state here the object of their love, it is evident in the verses that follow that they love Christ, His truth, His people, His kingdom, everything associated with Him. Labor that is produced by love is of great meaning to God and speaks loudly to humanity about the credibility of the faith.

The Thessalonians endured in their work and labor. There was evident in them a high level of persistence. There is a fine line between persistence and stubbornness but over the years many Christians could have taken lessons from the unregenerate in this most important ability to set a direction and maintain it against all obstacles. Very often in the hands of God a personality that is willful becomes a great asset simply because it doesn't let go of an objective without a fight.

There are several things that produce a willfulness in us that does not glorify God. The persistence in the Thessalonians was produced by their hope in Jesus Christ. They hoped for His appearing, which would bring about His righteous judgment. This hope produced in them a "sheer dogged determination" (Phillips). There were some things about the return of Christ that they thought wrongly about. But they had a solid hope in it that motivated them to persevere and for now Paul wanted to commend them for that relatively uncommon trait.

They practiced all of this together "in the presence of God." In other words, their faith was invasive. Their lives were product of companionship with God. There was the presence of the moment by moment awareness of Him and His desire for that moment. Everything was open to His scrutiny and submitted to His rule. Nothing was hidden or held back. Their work and labor did not consist of the heartless repetition of routine.

#### **1:4 "knowing, brethren beloved by God, his choice of you;"**

Throughout the Scripture the element of God's sovereign choice is presented as shaping the affairs of humanity both corporately and individually. There is also presented in Scripture the element of the choices individuals make and the impact of those choices on themselves and those they influence. Clearly humanity is presented as free, yet clearly under the sovereign control of God. The discussion of this is always problematical because it involves tensions that apparently lie beyond the information we have in God's revelation of Himself and His affairs. And so when we come to verses such as this, questions are raised that reach beyond the scope of the text itself. While there is no harm in discussing the larger issues behind such verses, we must be certain that we embrace what the text clearly says. At the very least, this verse affirms that God chooses those who are a part of His family.

Paul's primary assertion is that in the Thessalonians he sees conclusive evidence that God has exercised His sovereign choice. They are a group of people who have individually been joined to the Holy Spirit. Paul calls them "beloved of God." We know that God loves all of humanity. This term refers to those who are in covenant relationship with Him through belief in Jesus Christ. They are objects of His covenant promises. Paul knows this because of the trend of obedience he has seen in this group of people since the day he brought them the news of Jesus Christ (Acts 17:1-9).

This positive affirmation of the Thessalonians faith raises a question. Do all Christians give such crystal-clear evidence of their faith? Is a holy life inevitable due to God's sovereign choice of an individual? These questions require an extensive statement based on many statements in Scripture. Two things are important to state in terms of the present discussion. First, nowhere in Paul's letters do we find an example of a local church whose calling is in question. In the opening lines of his letters we always find the readers are addressed as an assembly, a collection of those summoned to relationship with God. In troubled churches like those in the province of Galatia and the church in Corinth, Paul calls into question whether they are in the way of the faith

as it was taught to them (2 Corinthians 13:1-10). He does not question their corporate identity, only their corporate direction. Second, Paul made clear that it is possible for whole groups of God's people to drift into ways of thinking and acting that are opposed to the will of God. In such cases they do not give the solid, clear evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit as demonstrated by the believers in Thessalonica. Because a clear corporate voice authenticates the message, Paul's desire was to see such a voice sound out from every local church. He affirms this in Thessalonians. He strives for this in other places through all his letters, even as the other apostles did (2 Peter 1:10-11).

The things that follow in Paul's description of the Thessalonians serve as examples of what kinds of people we should find in local churches. However, we get on shaky ground when we say these things are characteristic of EVERY believer. Paul is dealing here with a trend of behavior he has witnessed over time, the overall direction the Thessalonians had taken. It should not be assumed that every single individual Christian will demonstrate through exemplary behavior God's sovereign choice of them. There is in fact, a clear impression from Paul's words that this was an exceptional group of believers. We should draw from this that this indeed is the course that the Spirit directs lives in. It is what we would expect to find in mature believers who are obeying the Spirit's urgings as they should.

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

There are concrete affirmations that the Spirit is present where He has free rein in the spirits and hearts of people. This is not the same as saying that if such signs are not present that the Spirit is not present. It is only to say that where there is a high level of obedience there is a high visibility of the Spirit. Where there is sluggishness in spiritual matters there is a lack of the Spirit's visibility.

These verses are useful to us because particularly in the American church we can have the wrong criteria for judging success. Our natural valuation of most everything is that bigger is better. So given this natural bent it is natural to attribute divine blessing, spiritual acumen, and spiritual authority to movements that involve the most numbers. While not entirely wrong, this way of seeing things is certainly suspect, given God's own penchant for working with the remnant (Romans 11:1-5).

In the church in Thessalonica we see an example given of an unknown number of people who were becoming a certain kind of people. Reproducing a certain kind of people seems to be God's heart in both the old and New Testament eras. This is not to say that such a moment will not grow numerically. We see eras of shrink projected (Matthew 24:10), and eras of growth (Matthew 24:14). It seems that the numerical growth of God's family should always be our desire. Anything less reveals a heart that lacks compassion. But the ultimate manifestation of the Spirit is when we see a kind of life being reproduced. The testimony of Scripture seems to be that there can be numbers without heart (Deuteronomy 8:11-20). But where there is the heart of obedience there will be some level of numerical impact, as these verses clearly indicate.

These verses can be approached as a description of what happens to a group of people when they're listening to the call of God, or His summons to them. Some would say these verses describe what happens in any and every person when God elects or

chooses them. We must avoid this extreme. There are plenty of examples in Paul's epistles of unhealthy churches and Christians, though they were chosen by God. This is a description of people who by their obedience left no doubt as to the fact that they were God's elect.

We should also note that it is a snapshot of an entire church, over time. Proper care should be taken in applying it to an individual at a particular point in time in his or her life. Individually the Thessalonians likely all had moments when God's choice of them did not look so clear. Their consistency was found in the picture they presented in concert with each other. This is not to grant permission for low level of spiritual vitality. It is to have a fitting respect for the value of Christian community and for the corporate impact of a local church.

The primary mark of being chosen by God is that one believes the gospel message. To many the gospel is just another theory among many about God or gods. But to the Thessalonians it was not just a story. It was compelling. It was not just that the words entered their brains as words and thoughts normally do. There was power that accompanied the words that was unleashed in them that convinced them from within of the truth of the message. It was not that the presentation by Paul and the others was so compelling. The account in Acts 17 indicates that though many responded, many did not respond as well. This is in fact, further accentuated the fact that certain ones were called. People with similar interests, concerns, and ways of processing truth had entirely different responses to the message. There was power in the minds of some of the hearers to discern the truth of the message. This is always explained by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. And so Paul says that the message was accompanied by the Holy Spirit and so we observe that it had special power within the spirits of those whom God had chosen.

The Thessalonians experienced full conviction. This implies that there is a conviction that is not "full" in the sense that it does not result in faith. It is just conviction. When we look at the account in Acts 17 we can understand what is being referred to here. We find that many in Thessalonica were stirred up by the message so that they were offended by it. In fact, a mob formed in reaction to Paul. This is the result of a certain level of conviction that we see in several portions of Scripture (Acts 7:54; 16:16-18; 24:25). It actually has the effect of confirming people in unbelief. But among those chosen by God for faith the conviction is "full," resulting in belief, and more.

The Thessalonians did not stop at belief in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. They noted the example of Paul and his company, and how he and the others lived a certain way in order to facilitate and strengthen faith in others. The calling of God is not just to forgiveness. It is to a way of living and the mission. There is recognition of a pattern that He wishes to conform us to. The call of God when fully embraced leads to several practical conclusions that are seen clearly by others. The Thessalonians noticed the significance of Paul's lifestyle. This sort of recognition happens slowly in some. Some are sluggish in responding to God's call. But in the Thessalonians church there was from the beginning spiritual zeal. Theirs was a yieldedness that led to wonderful progress in the faith.

**1:6 “you also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word amid much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”**

We find in the brief account of Paul’s initial arrival in Thessalonica that Paul began ministry there in the place he often did, the synagogue. As result of dialogue there were some of the Jews who came to faith and “a great multitude of God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.” There ensued a violent reaction among the unbelieving Jews who instigated and agitated so that there was an uproar. It was a lynch mob of sorts, that created trouble for those who believe. So from the opening bell in Thessalonica there was trouble.

The result was that Paul left and went on to Berea. His initial visit to Thessalonica was a mixed bag. In fact, this is reflected in Acts where Luke’s evaluation is that the citizens of Berea were much more noble than those in Thessalonica (Acts 17:11). This was the initial impression.

So it was a rough beginning for the fledgling church. Paul captures that memory here by speaking of the affliction that immediately accompanied their faith. In spite of this affliction they had joy. This was not logical except as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. And so this joy served as a visible manifestation of the fact that they were chosen of God.

They also became imitators of the very ones who had in a sense brought them trouble. They embraced their lifestyle. They did not do this because of any practical benefit of it. They simply did it because it was right. Theirs was not a pragmatic decision. It was an inner conviction that this was true and right. Belief came in response to God’s call.

When Paul thought of the Thessalonians these are the things he remembered and thanked God for. They lived in such a way that he was confident that their faith was no flash in the pan. They were obviously God’s chosen ones.

**1:7 “so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”**

As a movement Christianity has likely always had certain congregations that seemed to be a cut above the rest in terms of their level of influence and impact. It is not easy to know why this is. There are likely leadership factors, factors related to the unseen spiritual realm, differences in the hearts of the members, and likely some element of God’s sovereign choice as well. Such flagship churches are an inspiration to many others in their own geographical area and beyond. This was the role the Thessalonian church was having.

Such a role as was the Thessalonian’s is coveted by many Christian leaders today. This is not new. One gets the strong impression that there were many who desired the spotlight that spiritual influence brings in the New Testament era as well (Acts 8:18–19). This is a desire that can be very good and it can also be a façade for the normal fleshly quest for recognition and position. Unfortunately, the masquerade is the more common occurrence.

The more genuine desire for impact is accompanied by brokenness, the weaning of oneself from fleshly pursuits, the disdain for fanfare and recognition. It is born out of prayer and casting off of all that relates to normal human concerns and pursuits. The real thing comes as a result of a profound moment or season of recognition that only one thing matters. That one thing is death to self, meaning persistent crucifixion of self-centeredness and its pursuits. Regardless of how it starts out, if it is genuine it

becomes a single-minded and deliberate desire to align oneself with what is right and true, and with Yahweh Himself.

Men can gain influence by mere force of will and executive skill. This is a common occurrence in our world. In fact, it is normal. It can and does crossover into the church so that hybrid churches are created by very talented men. Their movements are powerful by virtue of management organization and promotion. They do have impact. They even become the pattern by which other churches are shaped and formed. These are not categorically bad or evil. We should have regard for them. But this may not be the same thing as Paul is describing here that he saw in the Thessalonians.

None of this is to say that the power of organization, promotion, or executive skill are off limits in terms of authenticity. It is just to say that these alone produce a product that stops short of what Paul saw God produced in Thessalonica. They can produce such things independent of the presence of God in them.

It is frequent and even good for churches to judge their health by comparing themselves to other churches. Paul is reinforcing this idea here. He is commending it not denouncing it. But wanting and seeking spiritual influence like other churches have should not be assumed spiritual in and of itself. Such a desire is just as likely to lead to a Corinthian deviation (1 Corinthians 4:6-13; 14:36-38), as it is to lead to the Thessalonian's healthy pattern. Leaders must police this in themselves with great vigor.

A genuine desire for influence was the practice Jesus modeled and insisted on among the twelve (Matthew 20:20-28; Luke 22: 24-30). Not every spiritual leader presides over a Thessalonica. The assignment of some is to shepherd the disobedient and their greatness is often concealed to us (Ezekiel 3:4-15). The kingdom of God is such that for every charismatic, highly visible leader like King David, there are a myriad of Shama's who hold their ground alone in the field of lentils (2 Samuel 23:11-12). The mystery of the assignments made by God and the way in which He shows His presence and blessing in the work of His servants remains a mystery.

The Thessalonians had great impact over a wide geographical area. Paul attributes this to the open-hearted, unconditional acceptance of the Gospel, to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and to their imitation of the pattern of living model by the apostles. Obedience in the final analysis, is all that we have to give. Once we give it we must leave the scope of our influence in God's hands. Our ability to rest in this matter is a good way of understanding our own level of love for Him. If we chafe at serving in the small places, we should be cautious about seeing ourselves as giants in the faith. At either large places or small, we must guard ourselves against arrogance. Even the fact that God is using us does not necessarily bear witness to our obedience, since God uses all things good and evil to bring about His good purposes. In the end, our focus must be our own personal submission to Him and the absolute nature of it.

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

The phrase “the word of God” is used in various ways by the human authors of Scripture. Sometimes it describes the unwritten command of God that brought things into being (Hebrews 11:3; 2 Peter 3:5). Sometimes it refers to a special message that comes from God for a person or people through a prophet (1 Chronicles 17:3).



Sometimes it refers to the specific truth associated with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 13:46). The common thread in all these usages is that the phrase refers to that which is sourced in God and bears His absolute authority, and His innate power to give spiritual life (1 Peter 1:23; Hebrews 4:1 to). Later in this letter the Thessalonians will be commended for receiving the message of Paul in this way (1 Thessalonians 2:13), as the word of God.

It is the highest use of a human life to be one through whom the word of God sounds forth. That is what the Thessalonians became, people through whom that which brings eternal life was learned. That is a tremendous legacy to stop and ponder, and pursue.

The word rendered “sounded forth” is used only here in the New Testament. It is a compound word ἐξηχῆται combining the preposition ἐκ meaning “out”, with ἤχη. This latter word comes from a noun which means a loud noise or a roar. Used figuratively it can refer to a rumor. So Paul chooses a unique word to express what happened in Thessalonica. In more current vernacular we would say there was a “buzz” about what was going on in their lives. People were talking about it, and the buzz was not just in Thessalonica or towns close by. Paul describes it as being throughout Macedonia, Achaia, and then explicitly adds that it extends to every place. Macedonia and Achaia were two prominent provinces of Greece, no small sphere of influence in the ancient world. The addition of “every place” was hyperbole at the time, but strongly prophetic given the fact that all who have read the New Testament in the centuries since learned of the faith of the Thessalonians.

The story of their faith, as it was being told, will be revealed in the next verse and to a large degree the rest of Paul’s letter. The real-life example of lives changed by faith is very powerful. Paul states that himself and his companions had no need “to say anything.” Such a story becomes known without teachers and evangelists having to tell it, and as such it is very powerful. The movement needs such stories so that the faith is modeled and it is articulated. Both must be done for the movement to be healthy.

The catalyst for all this that made this church influential was the word of God. Again, this phrase includes God’s written revelation, and that which He directs for the moment, along with all the various decrees He has uttered which sustain the world and universe we know. In healthy Christians there is great attention given to the written word, marked by study and its embrace as one’s personal standard of living. They study the precise understanding, articulation, and application of its truths. They have vibrant faith in and submission to the sovereign will of God. They give freedom to God to move as His plan dictates and His glory demands.

In healthy Christianity there has also been an attentive ear for the voice of the Holy Spirit in the moment, the word of God for the situation or occasion. This latter element is fraught with danger if it is pursued and understood apart from God’s more objective revelation. If the element of adhering to the objective revelation of God is left out then obedience usually gives way to expedience and a morality characterized by a lack of restraint.

The objective word of God as recorded in Scripture, is our life breath. With it in hand we can know his subjective leading in the moment. Then we become a source of living water to those who are in our path. It is a great privilege to be an instrument of His word in this way.

**1:9 “for they themselves report to us what kind of reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,”**

Turning from idols is the ultimate demonstration of belief in the truth about Yahweh. It is what He longs for (Isaiah 30:22). In our culture in America we have idols. They are things that take the place of God in our lives. They shape our behavior and mold our values. These are a serious problem and we should put them aside and grind them to powder. We should never get to the point where we think idolatry is not a problem in our lives.

Yet, our idols are not the same as the idols the Thessalonians turned from. We do not view our idols as real beings, capable of actions against us. Their idols on the other hand were perceived by them as real beings. The Thessalonians feared some of them, revered them, and did all sorts of things to appease them and to curry their favor. Other gods they reveled in and took license for all manner of immoralities through them. In either case they were enslaved to superstition about these gods as if they were real.

To drop all these fears and excesses and set aside all these explanations for the realities of their world was a huge step of faith. It took great courage. It was the setting aside of all they had known and the embrace of something completely foreign. And they did it with zeal and conviction. It was a great story. It spoke of the absolute holiness, otherworldliness, or uniqueness of Yahweh. It gave visible demonstration of belief that there was no other God, no beings to appease or to fear. This lifestyle and thought pattern contrasted sharply with the well-developed system of divinities we learn about from our safe vantage point when we study Greek mythology. However, such beliefs were no myth to the Thessalonians' before Paul's declaration of the word of God.

Others witnessed this shift or turning in the Thessalonians and this became the subject of the “buzz” about them. The result was that Paul was not telling their story to others. Others were telling the story of the Thessalonians to Paul. But there was more about them that was being spoken of. It was not just what they were turning from. The buzz was also about what they were turning to and then waiting expectantly for.

**1:10 “and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.”**

The apostolic message, sourced in Jesus Christ and brought to the Thessalonians by Paul, had led the Thessalonians to turn away from their belief in idols. It had led them to remain alert expecting something else. That is an interesting picture of the Christian life. The picture describes the Christian life as embracing Yahweh instead of false gods and then remaining there in that posture of faith awaiting an event. So our focus is on Yahweh through whom we are sourced with truth, and that remains our preoccupation for an indefinite period time as we wait for a specific event He has promised.

The event they were anticipating was the coming of Jesus, who would come from heaven. The coming of Christ to establish his kingdom is an important element of the apostolic teaching (2 Peter 3:12; James 5:7-8; Revelation 1:7). The event was regarded as the pillar upon which hope was to be built in this life. (Romans 15:12-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:13-18; Titus 1:1-2; 1 Peter 1:13; 1 John 3:2). It was the basis of a strong theology of hope and remains so to all who believe in it.

This event is much-anticipated in terms of the written revelation of God (Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 24:29-31; Luke 21:25-36; Acts 1:6). The question is this: is the event being spoken of here the coming of Christ to establish his kingdom, or is it another coming of Christ? For much of church history the belief has been that passages like this referred to the coming of Jesus to the earth to punish the wicked with judgment that would bring about the destruction of the planet. This would make way for a new creation, the making of a new heaven and a new earth which would be inhabited by God's people who have had faith in him over the ages. They will be raised from the dead and given new bodies or, in the case of the living, transformed and given new bodies at his coming. This has been the general view of the church from roughly the third century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Since then a number of Bible students have taken a more literal approach to the prophetic writings. Though there is considerable diversity in the detail of their conclusions, many are seeing things like the day of the Lord and the return of Christ differently. This should not be viewed as a break with apostolic tradition, anymore than was the reformed thinking of Luther and Calvin, who broke with the mainstream Roman church. That movement and this re-examination of the Scripture's teaching on the return of Christ have this in common, a desire to return to the apostolic teaching on the subject and to conform to the message of Scripture.

The issue of Christ's return to earth from heaven will be talked about more by Paul in this letter and in his second letter to the Thessalonians. Paul's teaching is meant to bring further clarification to the Thessalonians minds on the subject. As Paul's statements are examined and harmonized with the rest of Scripture, a very clear picture of coming events emerges. The subject is important to Paul so that every chapter of his letter in our versions ends as does the first, with the statement on the Lord's return.

Another important matter is that in this verse we are told that Christ will deliver us "from the wrath to come." In the discussion and debate about this subject of the coming of Christ the meaning of this phrase has been rightfully seen as key. Isaiah spoke of Yahweh having a "day" set aside and marked out to confront evil on the earth (Isaiah 2:1 to-22; 13:6, 9). This "day" was designated as "the day of Yahweh." This truth was known to New Testament writers who taught it to the growing church (1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 2 Peter 3:10).

This "day" would be best understood as a period of time, rather than a 24-hour day, given the various things that the New Testament writers say the "day" will bring. We are told that this "day" will bring about the punishment of earthly nations (Psalm 2:2-9; Revelation 19:15), the redemption and vindication of the righteous (Matthew 13:41-43), the establishment of Yahweh as Earth's sovereign ruler (Isaiah 45:20-25), the final judgment of evil and the evil one (Revelation 20:7-10), the destruction of the present earth, and the creation of the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 20:11-21:3). In a passage which repeatedly uses the phrase "in that day," Isaiah speaks of these and a number of other events such as the fulfillment of Yahweh's land promises to Israel that would be brought about in this epic "day" (Isaiah 24-27). So we suspect it is an era, not just today.

The exact time of the beginning of this epic era, when Christ returns to earth, is unknown to us (Matthew 24:36; Luke 12:40; Revelation 3:3). When Christ was directly questioned as to the sign that this event was about to take place he spoke of an age of tumultuous events that would tend to give an appearance of an impending

cataclysmic divine judgment (Matthew 24:1-14), including the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:5-26). He made it clear that these kinds of events were not a sign that the “day” itself had arrived. Then he spoke of a period of time filled with tribulation, marked by “the abomination of desolation” standing in the holy place (Matthew 24:15-28). This would be a time of false Christ’s and misleading signs and wonders. Then Jesus says that immediately after this great apostasy and tribulation, the sun and moon would be darkened. This would occur immediately before His coming (Matthew 24:29).

This sign of a darkened moon and sun is also mentioned by the Old Testament prophets as a pre-cursor to the day of the Lord (Isaiah 13:9-10; Joel 2:31). This is reinforced by Peter (Acts 2:20), and by John (Revelation 6:12). So Jesus gave no date for his return and affirmed that the date was known only by God the Father. But He did give a picture of the long era leading up to the time of the end, gave a brief description of the years immediately preceding His return, and then gave a sign that would occur in the physical world just before his own advent.

John would write down, at the Spirit’s direction, more of the detail of those final days in the book we call “Revelation”, short for its full name “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” John followed the same basic format that Jesus did (Revelation 1:19). He described the long age leading up to Christ’s return, specifically the challenge for Christ’s church in staying connected to Christ as their head (Revelation 2-3). He then described the events that would characterize the years immediately preceding the advent of Jesus Christ. Most of the book of Revelation is occupied with this (Revelation 4-19). John mentions the darkening of the moon, as Isaiah, Joel, and Jesus had done, in Revelation 6:12. So most of his book describes “the day of the Lord,” the term introduced by Isaiah centuries earlier. John describes Christ’s return to conquer the Earth (Revelation 19:11-21), His rain on the earth (Revelation 20:1-6), and the final destruction of Satan, the judgment of evil men of all ages and the destruction of the earth (Revelation 19:7-14). He then describes the new creation (Revelation 21-22).

So if we wish to understand “the day of the Lord” we must look to the writings of the major and minor prophets. We must look to the New Testament authors as well, and especially to the book given to the revelation of Jesus Christ. There is amazing harmony between the various writers of both Testaments. This “day of the Lord” is what Paul is referring to when he speaks of the “wrath that is to come.”

Paul states that we wait for Jesus’ return to earth from heaven, and also states that Jesus delivers us from the wrath poured out when the day of the Lord commences. The implication is that our deliverance from the wrath of the day of the Lord is connected to Christ’s coming. This is the connection Paul will establish in chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 4 he will describe the Lord gathering us to Himself, snatching us from the earth whether dead or alive. The Thessalonians were uninformed about our being rescued from Yahweh’s appointed day of wrath by Jesus’ gathering of His own to Himself (4:13). They were not uninformed about the day of the Lord (5:1). He will however make some statements about “the day of the Lord” in Chapter 5.

Paul’s statement here in chapter one, that we will be saved from the wrath to come, is a critical one to recall later. It will be understood more fully once his statements in the remainder of this letter and those in his second letter to the Thessalonians are understood.

## 1 Thessalonians 2

**2:1 “for you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain,”**

There are those missionary efforts that are seemingly done in vain, with no result. These are more common from the human point of view. Likely such a thing rarely occurs from the divine point of view. It is very likely that most such efforts accomplish something that is the will of God.

Paul has been citing the things that he had seen come to pass in the lives of the Thessalonians and then through their lives. It is a great ministry experience when there is such plain and obvious fruit. It was clear that Paul's investment of time and effort had been worthwhile.

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

A bad reception on the part of hearers of the truth can cause us to lose our boldness in speaking it. In fact, such an experience can cause us to withdraw from ministry completely. A bad leadership experience when we are maligned and spoken against can cause us to stop leading or cause us to lead timidly. Pain often mistakenly leads us to shy away from doing the things for which Christ willingly suffered. This is a natural, instinctive human response to pain. Generally our survival depends on us doing just this very thing. However we must not let ourselves do this in spiritual matters. We must learn from our pain and adapt as God leads. Withdrawal from the conflict is not an option.

Paul references his mistreatment in Philippi that had occurred just before his arrival in Thessalonica. In Philippi Paul and Silas had been beaten, their dignity and Roman citizenship violated, to say nothing of their human rights. By today's standards they could have legitimately withdrawn, taken a sabbatical, enrolled in therapy, or quit ministry altogether. They could have at least taken another assignment away from the front lines.

In God they had the boldness to continue. That is an important idea. In God we can find strength to rise to opportunity, need, and demand. We can deal with fear, dread, doubt, feelings of inadequacy, any and every emotion that supplants zeal and fervency. This strengthening occurs, of course, within the context of the practice of physical and spiritual disciplines. Things like rest, proper eating, exercise, reflection, prayer, fellowship, and the like are energized by the Holy Spirit to maintain our courage and strength.

But the Spirit of God clearly takes us beyond our normal capacity to work and endure. Paul witnessed elsewhere of being led to the brink of his ability to persist in the ministry (2 Corinthians 1:8-11). So we know that we are still limited in our present being from both the physical and emotional standpoint. But Paul testified in words like these that we can be taken by the Holy Spirit to a higher threshold of performance in ministry in the midst of great weakness.

Paul and Silas were bold in the face of opposition. Ultimately opposition is the test of one's boldness. When Paul speaks of opposition, he was not dealing with just grumpy

church people. Acts 17 gives an example of the opposition Paul typically faced. It tells the story of the Jews forming a mob, inciting a riot, and then invading the home of one of the believers, Jason. Paul's boldness put his life in danger not just his comfort. Yet he continued. His was true boldness.

### **2:3 “for our exhortation does not come from error, or impurity, or by way of deceit;”**

This thought is linked to the previous verse by the conjunction “for.” So boldness that characterized Paul and the conviction that is felt by the Thessalonians both are explained further by the idea expressed in this verse. The explanation is the authenticity of the message and the messengers.

Paul characterizes his ministry as an exhortation. Words like encouragement, comfort, building up capture the meaning of the Greek word he uses here. The idea is that of an assist, an effort to take the hearer to next steps. Life change is always the heart of speech that the Holy Spirit orchestrates. Its purpose is to help people do something other than what they would naturally do. It equips them either with added knowledge or the necessary conviction to rise higher in the Spirit to things that are God's heart.

Exhortation it seems, by definition, is more than what we use the word “encouragement” for today. Comfort is primary in our popular use of “encouragement” today. “Encouragement” as our culture understands it is always the verbalization of positive thoughts. Exhortation in Scripture is positive in the sense that it is a “calling alongside,” a kind of embracing of the welfare of another. But it does not gloss over the negative, the sin, or sinfulness of the hearer. Like God, we call sin what it is by defining the higher ground to which others are being summoned. The hearer is motivated and inspired by exhortation to let go of the mundane and profane in order to grasp what is infinitely higher. We should strive to make our words to others messages of exhortation. We are to keep a keen eye out for what motivates those individuals that God puts in our path, and seek to motivate them to become more of what God wants them to be.

We can be motivated toward both good and evil. We can become highly motivated to do what is a disaster spiritually. So whenever anyone speaks in a way that we feel ourselves being motivated, we should be certain that the direction we are being taken in is that which pleases our Lord. The right kind of guardedness is a spiritual asset. The Scripture speaks of “alertness” (1 Peter 5:8; Colossians 4:2). Alertness is essential to our spiritual safety and health.

Paul seeks to aid our alertness and so speaks of three things that are not factors in his own ministry. He speaks of these because they often are factors that motivate religious leaders, and others as well, and they are certain to produce sickness in followers.

The first thing Paul assures the readers is that his message does not spring from deceit. The word he uses for deceit is a common word used in Scripture for that which strays from orthodoxy. It comes from a word that means roving, as a romantic wanderer would. It refers to that which is outside the appropriate boundaries, what we would call alternative, or not in the mainstream. Paul uses this word to express the fact that he was no traveling huckster or con artist that came to town, hoodwinked some people, and left with a pocket full of money. He was not a deceiver looking to profit in some way from his message. There has never been a shortage of such people who would speak smoothly and powerfully so that people are drawn to their words and

become their advocates, followers, and even slaves. It is a bitter taste that follows being a victim of such a scam.

We should all be alert to such tactics, being careful not to just feel good about ministry, but to do the hard work of Spirit-filled analysis. Such analysis uses principles of Scripture combined with common sense to scrutinize the person and their words. This testing of others is not to be confused with what is just fleshly suspicion that resists any new voice. It is not hard-heartedness that fights off conviction. It is wisdom at work, the voice of experience and the Spirit, realistic about life in a fallen world, anxious always to hear from God, not afraid of hearing hard things from Him, hungry for correction where needed, but astute regarding the Scriptures and the spirit of man. Paul hated false teaching and deceitful ministry and went to great lengths to assure the churches of his own integrity (2 Corinthians 2:17-3:3; 4:1-2; See also chapters 10-12).

The second thing that Paul names that can motivate religious leaders is impurity. The word has a range of meaning conveying everything from being spiritually dead (Matthew 23:27), to lewdness and immorality (Romans 1:24). Ultimately it refers to that which is sourced in the evil one rather than in the Holy One. There is much religious thought in the world that is demonic. In fact, most of it is. It is truth that is rare and in short supply. Because of the mixing of truth and error, of pure and impure thoughts, we need to know and build on apostolic teaching. When Paul said that his exhortation did not spring from impurity, he is testifying to the fact that he had no hidden agenda, no dark secrets, no concealed motives that were shaping his actions and words. That is an important principle for ministers to embrace that Paul called “having a clear conscience” (1 Timothy 1:5). It is critical if one wishes to be used as a conduit of truth.

We can only identify with Paul’s statement here to some degree in that he and the other apostles were unique in the words they spoke and in the authority of those words. We believe that in the words of the apostles, the Spirit was preserving truth in writing for us. He enabled them to record in writing the exact and precise thought of God for us, without error. The words of the apostles as recorded in Scripture are in absolute harmony with the rest of Scripture and the mind of God. They are “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). They are the standard by which all else is to be judged.

The third thing Paul has separated himself from was deceit. The word means to bait or to trick. It implies very deliberate, premeditated action that brings someone into subjection so as to serve the purposes and needs of another. As depraved as it sounds it is common in church relationships and is the *modus operandi* of many pseudo-spiritual leaders. Paul was falsely accused of this by some (see 2 Corinthians 1:16-17), as most spiritual leaders are at one time or another. But it remained true that his motive in getting others to follow him was their eternal good and the health of the church not some personal need for recognition.

Every person who would lead the church must begin by asking God to purge from them any and all semblance of these motives. They should never assume that these are absent in them. That is why God will usually test and stretch people to their breaking point before entrusting them with ministry, to help them purge such things from their own thinking. It is a painful process, but it helps one avoid the greater pain of duplicity.

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

There is an approval process that God initiates and oversees. It is largely mysterious to us yet we are part of it, sometimes as subjects of it and sometimes as witnesses to it. It is a very thorough process. It deals with our hearts, as Paul indicates here. That is the difference between Yahweh's process and normal human processes of approval. God deals with what is concealed. Some things we conceal because of shame. Some we conceal to deliberately trick and deceive others. The latter things are more serious, but God is concerned with all that is concealed.

This approval process of God can be circumvented. It often is. Men take the honor of ministering the truth on themselves. It seems that time usually brings out the true nature of all who do so, but this is not a given, and many can be damaged and deceived in the process.

We can loosely pull together elements in the approval process as it was carried out in Paul. There was first the definitive summons by God that occurred on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Paul was brought to believe in an instant that his course in life up to that point had been an error, and that God's will for him was to be a proponent of Christ, not a persecutor of Christ.

Second, there was the integration of Paul into the process of the acceptance and approval of the human leadership that had already been established in Christ's movement. Ananias was the key player initially in this (Acts 9:10-1/9). Next was Barnabas and then some of the apostolic company (Acts 9:26-30). Though Paul began to declare the gospel immediately, there is evidence that God's approval process was not completed yet.

Paul himself states that he was not involved more deeply with the other apostles. Instead he went away first to Arabia and eventually back to Damascus (Galatians 1:17). It was three years later that he spent time with Peter (Galatians 1: 18), and several years were spent in relative obscurity as he apparently developed his message (Galatians 1:19-24). It was during this time that he likely had the visions he refers to in 2 Corinthians (2 Corinthians 12:1-4), in which the Lord himself instructed him in matters of His kingdom. This was also likely the time when Paul pondered the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures and came to understand more completely their testimony of Christ. So there was in the approval process of Paul initiated by God a period of time that involved ministry, but primarily it was a time of reflection, learning, synthesis, and refinement. It lasted several years, perhaps as many as twenty (see Galatians 1:18-2:1).

Third, after this period of refinement, Paul was led to meet with the apostles and present his message and understanding of spiritual things he had arrived at for their approval (Galatians 2:1-10). He was submissive in this, not a maverick, willing to be corrected (Galatians 2:2). It was after this that could be understood as the final stage of God's process that we see Paul's ministry becoming more public and taking on a much higher profile. This did not mean that he was done in terms of his development. This was simply the approval process.

It is a mistake to think that Paul was transformed from a persecutor of the church to a church leader overnight. The process began very dramatically, but it was carried out quite deliberately and without fanfare. It required much diligence from Paul over many years. That is what we know of God's approval process in the case of Paul, but much of it remains a mystery.



One thing is certain. We do well to search for that process in the lives of those we select for ministry. It can and is circumvented, but at great cost to the body of Christ and great pain to those who are truly approved by Him. We do well to search it out in our own lives and be aware of where we are at in that process. This is most urgent for all who aspire to lead God's church which is a noble ambition (1 Timothy 3:1).

There are additional words in this verse that are noteworthy in the context of this approval process of God. These are the word "entrust," the words "pleasing God," and the word "examination."

The gospel is presented here as a sacred trust. This no doubt means that we not simply speak about it, but that we regard its content sacred and strategic, purposefully proclaiming it and preserving it unchanged. And so we see Paul zealously fighting for the gospel's purity, combating the Jews insistence on mingling words of the Law into it. We see him defining very precisely its theological basis, and hovering over it with a hands-on approach, insistent, even with what was a demanding demeanor (1 Timothy 4:15-16; 2 Timothy 1:13-14; 4:1-4; Titus 1:10-11). We see that in the declaration of it he sought to be in harmony with the leading of the Holy Spirit, the master strategist (Acts 16:6-10). Yet he was not exclusive in its proclamation, but inclusive. We see him persistently seeking to find opportunities to engage others in the proclamation of the gospel message (Acts 17:1-2, 10, 16-34).

Paul mentions here that when he spoke his aim was to please God not man. That is a big hurdle to clear for anyone in ministry. It is the central point of this verse. Paul developed a good balance in the matter of pleasing God and pleasing men. He spoke to please God but could also say the he had become all things to all men (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). That is a critical line to walk. Either extreme is far easier.

We must be known for gracious words (Luke 4:22). We must also not shrink back from declaring the truth (Acts 20:17-21). The key is to know what each situation calls for in terms of the mind of God and please Him in that moment. Now if moments are missing from our experience when we restrain ourselves from being an offense, we are likely deceiving ourselves. Conversely, if moments are missing when we speak that which obviously displeases people, we are likely shrinking back from God's will at times.

The third idea present in the statement of a ministry that God approves is the reminder that God examines hearts. Paul, in speaking of the fact that he has been approved by God and entrusted with the gospel, is not afraid to suggest that his own heart must have been found to be right by God's standard. That is a bold assertion. Now we know that Paul did not view himself as being without sin. Nevertheless, he expressed confidence that he was approved of God.

This can only mean that Paul was aware of his own imperfections. But He was also aware of his own history and a long string of events by which God had confirmed His purposes for him. Thus there is an appropriate confidence that spiritual leaders must develop, when they need not be afraid to state in a humble way their authority. They must feel such confidence privately. They will be shaken on occasion, and that is likely healthy. But they must find a renewal of boldness, or they run the risk of the sin of the Israelites, lapsing in their faith in God's plan for them.

The primary idea God wants understood in this verse is that just as God approved Paul for a lifetime of ministry, so Paul himself, in dependence on Holy Spirit, sought God's approval of the words he would speak in each moment. Paul did not simply speak those that other men might approve. That is the real job of all who are spiritual

leaders, to seek God's mind for the moment. As meticulously and as prayerfully as we seek God's mind for our position in ministry, so we should seek His mind in our message. The process that led to our approval is the one Yahweh is looking to continue. His approval not only should extend to our position, but to our very words.

**2:5 “for we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with the pretext for greed God is witness ”**

Leaders can easily fall into flattery. It makes people feel good. It makes for a pleasant experience between leaders and those they are leading. At a fleshly level it works, but as it did in the case of Aaron (Exodus 32), it always sets in motion a course on the trail leading downward (Psalm 36:2; Proverbs 2:16, 7:5, 26:28; 29:5; Daniel 11:32; Romans 16:18; Jude 16). People always need to be encouraged and spiritual leaders must affirm and encourage continually. But flattery occurs when achievements are deliberately overstated in order to avoid an unpleasant situation or to manipulate another so as to gain the advantage. Flattery appeals to the flesh and so it is powerful. It accomplishes nothing in terms of the spiritual development of people. Encouragement and affirmation must be truthful. As state earlier, we must exhort! There is no future in creating an addiction to praise. Flattery is the classic method of those looking to advance their self-serving agenda.

Paul so steered clear of this tactic that he could call to witness the reader's own memories. They knew that his declaration of the truth confronted sin and unbelief and had called them to repentance. Far from flattering, the message of the cross had been offensive to the Jews in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-5). Paul calls God as his witness to the fact that he had no pretext for greed. Greed is particularly divisive and wears many disguises.

We can take from this that greed is one thing that can be concealed, undetected by us in the hearts of others. Though we must be alert for various signs of greed, we can only pray that God will bring to light what people have concealed so that leadership will not be compromised. We must be alert to all signs of it in ourselves and pray that God will guard us from it, because greed destroys whole movements.

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

All people are to some degree anxious for the glory of men. Since the glory of humanity was compromised by Adam and Eve, there has been a constant need in us to have our value and worth affirmed. What came naturally when we were in union with our Creator must now be gained artificially by our own efforts. So ingrained in us is this need, that even once we are reunited with Yahweh we must constantly work at weaning ourselves from this need for the glory from men. We must re-train ourselves and embrace the worth that is ours through Christ and the fulfillment that can be ours through the work He wishes to do in and through us. To have Him is to have all we need.

The glory of man includes all that conveys status and recognition, from title and power and control to money and the symbols of status it can buy. It includes friendships and social standing. It is getting recognition and credit for ideas and work accomplished. There are many things material and immaterial that Christians substitute for the deepening walk with the Lord. Only that walk can satisfy their deepest need. The

result is a very worldly type of Christianity that is easily shaken and cast aside in life's storms. A very low level of commitment to Christ is embraced and so a very shallow level of peace and rest is entered into. Our experience is like that of the wilderness generation of Israelites who never entered the promised land. The quest for the glory of man is a dead-end apart from God. It is like the search for the fountain of youth.

Paul and the apostles had seen "the life." Jesus modeled life lived in perfect fellowship with God, for His glory. It was rich and refreshingly different. It was right not simply because it "worked", but because God Himself approved it. They had seen enough of this life modeled that they would not be taken in by the short-sighted joys of this world.

Our challenge is to become like that. It is not just a problem for American Christianity. It is a human problem. It makes no difference whether one lives in the deepest poverty or the lap of luxury, they must determine if they will strive to achieve the glory of man or the glory of God.

Paul says that as apostles they could have asserted their authority. That is true. Spiritual authority creates opportunity for the flesh, great opportunity. Through the Spirit there is great power to influence. Where there is opportunity to influence there is occasion to control, and at that point all sorts of fleshly needs can take over (Acts 8:18-24). One shudders to think of what the apostles could have done had they abused their power. That is why so often Jesus spoke to them about denying the longing to be first (Luke 22:24-30), denying the quest for honor (Luke 14:7-8), and the hunger for authority and power (Matthew 20:20-28). These things have to be dealt with before a leader is safe.

The apostles could have taken a much higher profile in terms of utilizing earthly trappings of authority. Instead they realized the deadliness of such a thing in the church long-term. They caught the warnings of Christ on this matter and understood the inherent weakness of humanity present in themselves and all of God's people. They eschewed all that would give an appearance of the desire for status and recognition. This created a peculiar vulnerability. Flamboyance, after all, creates a fleshly credibility that attracts followers. False teachers who embrace such tactics could work their way into the churches (2 Corinthians 11:19-20; 3 John 9-10; 2 Timothy 3:6-9), and they did. Still, such leadership tactics must be avoided. Church history has proven that the danger of spiritual men utilizing such fleshly tactics establishes that within the Church that is catastrophic. Whole generations are lost when once-spiritual leaders opt for the short-term results of the trappings of authority bring. The quest for the glory of man is a destructive one.

**2:7 "but we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children."**

The apostles occupied some special office in the mind and heart of God which will extend to the new earthly kingdom (Matthew 19:28), and beyond (Revelation 21:14). They were and are in God's mind great men. There is no doubt that if any deserved honorable treatment these men did. There is no doubt that if any deserve public acclaim they did. If any deserved undivided loyalty they did. If anyone's words should have been revered it was those of the apostles. But they had seen God incarnate wrap a towel around his waist and wash their feet. He was one who served those who sought to lead and sought to inspire what was to characterize their leadership. It was a lesson well learned by those who had watched Jesus and by those such as Paul who

would contemplate his life. It will be embraced by all who rightly understand the life Christ.

Paul describes his personal manner as a leader here to the readers. His intent was to inspire any and all would lead to the same pattern, passed down from Christ. It was a personal manner marked by gentleness. The word Paul uses, *νηπιος*, means “without words”. It is a term for an infant elsewhere in Paul’s writing. It was rendered child (1 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 4:1, 3; Ephesians 4:14). Paul uses it here because it captures the harmless and vulnerable nature of a small child. They must be handled carefully and gently. Paul and his company treated those they led to faith as one would a small child.

Paul continues to draw metaphorically from the home by comparing his manner to that of a nursing mother. The term mother is added by the NASB to express the idea of the Greek word chosen by Paul. This simile captures Paul’s single-mindedness with regard to the welfare and health of the Thessalonians. Taken together these two ideas contrast sharply with the normal flesh and leadership that characterizes the movements, organizations, and institutions of the world.

Spiritual leadership is profoundly different from normal leadership encountered in life. By spiritual, we are not talking primarily about what kind of activity is being led. (i.e., Church versus business, sports versus Bible study). We are talking about leadership directed by the Holy Spirit, exerted in any arena of life. The Holy Spirit makes leadership spiritual. In other words spiritual leadership is flowing from the Spirit-led person. Their agenda in leadership is Spirit-led.

Spirit-led leadership is marked by a concern for the ultimate eternal well-being of the people being led. There is a simplicity brought to complex matters that marks the absence of mixed motives. There is truthfulness, and so the truth can be revealed. There are relationships not just policies and procedures. There is directness in dealing with wrongdoing. There are tough conversations done in a calm resolute manner. It is leadership that rises courageously and lovingly to the need of the moment.

This is the kind of leadership that Jesus embodied. It is the kind of leadership that describes God in His leadership of the universe. It is who He Himself is. There are a variety of styles of leadership that the Holy Spirit will energize. Each will look a little different. All are reflected in some way by the figure of the infant and the mother.

**2:8 “having thus a fond affection for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.”**

Paul continues to share what gives us insight into the personal manner that characterized his leadership. The word he uses to describe his affection for the Thessalonians is, *ομαιρομενοι*. It is used only here in the New Testament. It describes a yearning or longing. It is a fond affection but also a very deep one. It is that feeling that seems to come from the very core of one’s being. It shows that Paul opened his own emotions to people and invested himself in them. He did not remain detached or aloof for self-preservation. Throughout his writings we see this idea (2 Corinthians 6:11-13). We see that the apostles did the intellectual, the leadership, and the relational work of ministry. It is a challenge for any human to do them all and keep them in balance. We do not have the option of letting any of those elements go if we wish to have health in our churches.

Paul describes his ministry as in imparting of the gospel of God and in imparting of his own self. The noticeable thing in the text is the presence of the phrase “of God” and the phrase “our own lives.” The ministry is both if it is modeled after Christ. It is an imparting of all that is God’s and all that is in one’s own being. Both have their challenges.

Ministry that is just the impartation of the minister is much more common than we might think. Such a minister might be quite affectionate and will duly love those he leads. But such ministers do not speak with unction. That is, there is not in their words and manner the giving of the mind of God for the moment. So they comfort people, are great companions to get others through their difficulties, but they do not give them what they need to get over their weaknesses or have victory over them. Ministers must impart the mind of God, or they’re little more than good friends.

The things of God that a minister gives come from God’s very being. They are simply the outflow of who He is. We gain them through time spent with Him. He gives them to us to give to others. We impart them right when we impart them prayerfully, affectionately, passionately, warmly, precisely, understandingly, and lovingly. A host of other “soulful” adverbs could be employed to capture completely this idea of imparting oneself. We must impart the things of God with all that is in us. It is a huge investment we make of ourselves if we do ministry in this way. The anxiety, the sleepless nights, the troubled relationships, must all be managed well if we are to hold up under the rigors of it. There is always an aftermath of ministry that is done affectionately. It is still a battle for hearts and souls. So we deal with its collateral effects. We feel the loss of strength in our bodies eventually.

Later in this chapter and in other places Paul speaks of the suffering and shameful treatment that happens in ministry (verses 13-16; 2 Corinthians 1:8-11; 10:5-12; 11:24-31). It is complex, stressful, hard work. But it is also work in which strong, fulfilling bonds are established with many faithful and wonderful people.

**2:9 “for you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.”**

When Paul preached the gospel, his pattern was to make his living by other work, or by receiving contributions from churches in other places (1 Corinthians 9:1-18; 2 Corinthians 11:8-12). It is not that he thought it wrong to receive wages for ministry. In fact, he taught that such a thing was and should be the norm (1 Corinthians 9:1-14). So he was not trying to establish a new norm. Working for his living outside of ministry was something he himself chose to do (1 Corinthians 9:18). The result was what he described here as his experience in Thessalonica. He worked night and day. Likely by day Paul earned a living. By night he did the work of ministry.

Paul’s goal in this practice was to not be a financial burden to a church. God led him to do this likely because in so doing Paul would stand in stark contrast to false teachers that would arise (2 Corinthians 11:12-15). So he persisted in this pattern even though it took more out of him. He wanted the fact that the gospel came to them without financial cost, to authenticate the gospel in a deeper way. However, there is no indication that other apostles did this, nor is there any indication that it was more noble (1 Corinthians 9:5-6).

Besides helping authenticate the gospel, some personal factors influenced this practice in Paul. First, this was a free will offering on the part of Paul to both churches

and to the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:16-18). Second, it seems Paul's emotional makeup influenced this practice. The kind of ministry he seemed to be repeatedly attracted to supports the idea that in his emotional make-up he was independent. He liked building where no one else was building (Romans 15:20-21). He liked life on the frontier—on the lead edge of the movement. It is certain that this independence was under the Spirit's control. But it is a part of how Paul's ministry should be understood. The practice of earning a living outside of the gospel was a function of how God made him.

The fact that Paul practiced this shows that there is latitude in how we conduct ministry. It must still be under the rule of the head Christ. But there is variation in methodology and even individual codes of ethics and principles within the general framework of the ministry God is orchestrating. This latitude falls far short of license or excess. We must not abuse this permission. But neither may we be arrogant about our philosophy of ministry and make demands of others as if our way is somehow more noble.

**2:10 “You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly, and uprightly, and blameless we behaved toward you believers.**

Paul and his company had gone to great lengths to scrutinize their own behavior so as to be certain that at all times it conformed to the pattern established by Christ. No one can be so conformed in the absolute sense of the terms Paul uses here. Only Christ did that. For the rest of us there is a proper way to deal with our sin. That is done through confession and repentance toward God, along with humility, confession, and restitution where we have sinned against others. For God's people this is what is meant by living the devout, upright, blameless life.

If one wishes to impact others it starts with leading oneself well. The messes and inconsistencies one allows in the hidden portion of their lives become limiting factors in their ability to influence others. Influence can be gained in ways other than through righteous character, as it commonly is. So it has never been unusual for men and women to speak, write, perform and so find their way into positions of influence in the Christian community.

God's way to bring about influence is through the work of the Spirit. It is done in secret. It is to conform a person into His image and then, when the time is right, to bestow on them a sphere of influence. It is not wrong to desire a greater sphere of influence if such a thing is of Him. That is where it gets tricky and we can easily deceive and be deceived.

Paul had done the work in secret that should be done by all church leaders. He had pondered and scrutinized prayerfully his own thoughts and actions. He had in place habits so that this process was never abandoned. He was not afraid to summon either people or God as witnesses to the motives that pushed him forward.

Paul uses three words to describe he and his companion's hearts in ministry. There is much overlap in the meaning of these three words. The effect of Paul's words is that both his purity and that of his companions is affirmed in an emphatic way. The words are rendered devoutly, uprightly, and blameless. All these words are adverbs. By that role in the sentence, they are describing the manner in which the activity of ministry was carried out.

Paul and his companions had become holy. That is what the NASB rendering “devout” captures. Behavior that is “holy” or “devote” is what we could term “wholly otherly” than normal human behavior. The word upright is the rendering of the word normally rendered with the English term “righteously.” So Paul and his companions were characterized by all that was right and proper by both the standards of men and God. They also spoke of being without blame. This does not mean that they were absolutely without moral failure. It means that they were without intentional failure and unresolved failure.

It is very important how we conduct ourselves towards God’s church that He Himself has gathered, and then entrusted to our influence. There is a stewardship of this privilege of influence. We do not use it as a means of gain, material or immaterial. We behave rightly when we persist in inviting scrutiny of the things that motivate our actions. We must remain open to scrutiny regardless of the size of our sphere of influence and regardless of our years of experience.

**2:11 “just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father with his own children,”**

Just as in the previous verse where three terms described Paul’s integrity and ministry, three words also describe how he treated those he ministered to. He exhorted, encouraged, and implored them. These words represent what he did that gave him a reputation of being devout, upright, and blameless. All three words describe activity that is relational, personal, and passionate. It is activity meant to bolster and strengthen and its tone is captured in the imagery of a father addressing his children that Paul uses in the next phrase.

The word rendered exhort in the NASB is the standard term for speech meant to encourage and strengthen someone in the midst of difficulty. It is the idea of being near them and calling out that which will help them persist. The second word, rendered encouraging, is a word used of comforting someone who is in grief. It too conveys the idea of nearness. But rather than calling out it implies simply relating to someone. It can be done simply by being present. The third word, rendered imploring, is a word that means to testify, or to relate something as a personal witness. It conveys urgency, solemnness, and seriousness, and also a sense of warning.

After using these three words Paul describes his approach to the Thessalonians as individual. He says that he had such conversations with “each one.” Paul believed in the power of personal appeal. His ministry activity was not confined to public appearance or the larger assembly. He sought out personal encounters.

Paul describes his ministry as intensely relational. Paul uses military imagery to describe ministry (2 Corinthians 10:1–6). He also uses athletic imagery (1 Corinthians 9:26–27). But in this letter he is using for the second time imagery of the home (see verse 7), to describe the personal and affectionate element that the Holy Spirit’s presence brings to the church. This personal and nurturing element should be evident in our ministry.

**2:12 “so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”**

This phrase describes the end to which Paul did the things that he did. He was not ministering in such an intensely personal way just to make people feel valued and encouraged, though they all need that. His objective was to bring about a certain way of life in them.

The lifestyle he describes is one that is worthy of God. This call to worthiness is given several times in Paul's writings (Ephesians 4:1; Philippians 1:27; Colossians 1:10). Paul understood our unworthiness and our depravity. But still through grace he deemed humanity capable and even obligated to pursue a life worthy of God. The object of these summons was not for us to prove that we merited the honor or blessing given to us by putting our innate goodness on display. In Paul's writings we are summoned to embrace God's power and character and put IT on display through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Whenever Paul summons us to a kind of walk, he has walking in the Spirit in view. It is a life of faith and trust that then becomes the display of God's power and glory. The worthy walk puts Him on display not us. God has called us into His own kingdom and glory.

Jesus taught his disciples that they were part of the kingdom and that they would share His glory (Matthew 13:11; 16:19; John 17:24), as would all who believed in Him (John 17:20-26). These two things he shares with all who believe in Him. Both His kingdom and His glory are immeasurable blessings.

His kingdom is a realm of absolute perfection. Its rule is that all things are conformed to who He is. There can be no contradiction in His kingdom, no falling short, and no deterioration or corruption that would deviate from the standard. He is eternally who He is and is Himself the stability of all that is.

His glory is the destiny of all He is made and allowed to be. His glory is the final purpose, or state, all things are moving toward. That we have been called to His glory means that we have an identity that guarantees us a presence and role in all He will do for all of eternity. All things will be made to glorify Him, some by His sheer power and force. We have been called to a rule through which we ourselves are a glory to Him. It is already inherent in us because He has joined Himself to us. That joining to us is only the earnest of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:11-14). Paul is summoning us to embrace this beginning God has made in us and to have it take its fullest desired effect.

**2:13 “and for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.”**

Like the two sons in Jesus' parable to the Jews (Matthew 21:28-32), we make subsequent decisions after we hear the truth from God's various messengers. We must assign it a value. It is the kind of message that demands a specific response. To not respond is a response of “No!” So we do respond. It is a rare thing to encounter those who respond as the Thessalonians had.



Due to the response Paul describes here, he is led to constantly (literally, without a pause), thank God for the Thessalonians. The pronoun “we” is emphatic. Paul and his company saw many responses, but even with all their experiences of declaring truth and seeing change people, they were forever moved by what they had encountered in Thessalonica.

Paul describes his message to them as “a word of hearing from us of God.” There was something to be heard from God delivered by Paul, along with Silas, Timothy, and others. Each of the pieces of that description is important. As long as we just hear a message, it simply joins the millions of messages our minds receive each day. But the messengers or deliverer tend to have impact on how we respond. Some we ignore for various reasons. Some we accept. Some we assign a certain special significance to. When they speak, because of something in them or about them we listen.

There is after initial acceptance a next level of mental sorting we do. Paul specifically states that the Thessalonians did something after they received Paul’s message. The NASB does not reflect this in it’s rendering, but the little phrase “when you received” is the rendering of an aorist participle which described action that occurs before that of the main verb. So in this case, the activity of accepting came after the activity of hearing. What happens after people hear the truth is critical (Matthew 13:1-23). It is everything. They will make decisions that shape their eternal destiny. The truth is powerful. It can change us, or can stand as our judge and condemn us. It is our decision that determines which of these two roles the truth will play.

Paul describes the decision that the Thessalonians made in the wake of his declaration of the truth to them. They decided it was a message from God delivered by men. In other words they decided it was the very thing that it was. When people make that decision the message works powerfully in them as it is described in the last phrase of this verse.

This explains how a church with no resident leadership or mature Christians could spring into existence and sustain itself, when Paul was there only a few short weeks. When the truth is given free rein by this kind of decision within people, it works very powerfully and very quickly. It creates a self-sustained movement of people that provide all the elements it needs to thrive and expand.

Truth has its source in God. That assigns it a whole different level of urgency than all the other influences that bombard us and compete for our time energy and focus. Because of its source, it works powerfully in us. The idea of the words Paul chose in the language of his day is that truth is a great source of energy that is unleashed within us. The verses that follow describe an astounding rise to the occasion that happened in these people in this unlikely place in Greece. They would become a flagship church on the frontier of the growing movement.

**2:14 “For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews.”**

In the early church, as the apostles and Paul built and established it, there was going to be a pattern that was evident across cultural lines. It started in this way with the simple imitation of churches that had history. There would eventually be a shift in terms of the geographic direction this would flow in, but for now it was emanating from Jerusalem and Judea in Palestine. It had begun with the simple imitation of Christ

by those who had seen, heard, examined, and touched him (1 John 1:1-3). As decades passed whole churches came into existence in places like Thessalonica and these imitated the pattern that had been embraced and demonstrated first in Judea.

There would be a slow shift in the pattern of influence that the Thessalonians themselves would be a part of. Already they had developed a sphere of influence so that others were looking to them and not back to Judea. Within a relatively short time there would be several centers of influence. Eventually the direction of influence would be from West to East, as it was in the Roman Empire. Yet even with this shift, there remains to this day a desire to imitate those early Judean movements that were the birthplace of the New Testament church. At times this has been an obsession and even has lapsed into idolatry. But it has a healthy side in that a pattern of a way of life has continually been in the back of our collective mind.

The portion of the pattern that Paul focuses on that he saw emerging in Thessalonica was the suffering that had taken root there the injustices committed by those of Thessalonica against those of the faith. The same sufferings instigated by Jews against the church in Judea were being carried out in Thessalonica. The same response was being embraced by the Thessalonian Christians as had been embraced by the Christians in Judea. There was in both places persistent endurance in the faith and persistent practice and declaration of it. They had not wavered. Acts 17 reports the Jews in Thessalonica were the originators and instigators of this. But it had apparently been embraced by the other citizens.

Imitation is a key element of Christianity. Christianity is not a way of thought that we are free to change and adapt to our convenience and liking. Though there is flexibility in cultural matters and freedom in some areas of conduct, there are certain essentials in terms of both belief and practice. Already in the writings of the first century we find summons to imitate, practice, and defend the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5; Philippians 1:27; Colossians 2:7; 2 Timothy 3:8; Titus 1:13; Jude 3). The Thessalonians are commended for this that captures the essence of the whole Christian movement. Christianity is essentially the imitation of one life—that of Christ.

**2:15 “who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men,”**

Having spoken of the Jews in Judea, Paul now makes a series of comments on them that are both descriptive and prophetic. As one of them, he understood both their glory and their shame.

It was the position of Christ in the early church that the Jews had persistently killed the prophets whom God had sent to them (Matthew 23:31, 37; Acts 7:51-52). This was not far-fetched. It was also the position of the Old Testament, and the reason given in the official Jewish record for the downfall of the kingdom God had granted them (2 Chronicles 36:15-16). Thus the name Israel, which means “he fights with God” (Genesis 32:28), was prophetic, an accurate picture of the course the nation would follow.

Israel then by both name and reputation came to be a picture of humanity. They had the invitation and opportunity to be specially related to God. But the covenant of the Law could not enable them to be anything but fallen humanity, in need of God’s free grace.

Their behavior, cited here as it was, stands in stark contrast to the work which the new covenant had brought about in Thessalonica. These had received the message as it really is, as the word of God. It had worked powerfully in their lives. A careful reader cannot help notice this idea coming through here as it did in most all of Paul's writings. The old covenant did not enable humanity to please God, but demonstrated their inability even with the motivation of God's great blessing or discipline (Deuteronomy 28), and his extraordinary presence and demonstration of power among them.

The verse ends with describing the Jews as "hostile to all men." They developed an exclusive attitude, a spirit of arrogance toward all other ethnic groups. They did not wish to include them as their equals in any sense. They had taken God's laws of separation and twisted them to infer some innate goodness and merit in themselves. The truth was they were stubborn and rebellious. (Deuteronomy 31:27). They were representative of humanity not above humanity. God's laws described a goodness they themselves were to seek and pursue that was of God. They were to become a holy people because their God was holy (Leviticus 19:2). They were not innately any different from the rest of humanity. The hostility and arrogance they developed in this matter proved this very thing.

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

Jesus accused the Pharisees of his day with hindering the spiritual progress of many (Matthew 23:13-15). This devilish work only seemed to grow in them once Jesus was gone (Matthew 28:11-15). They approached it with an evangelistic zeal. Paul understood the inner workings of it very well having been a Pharisee and a part of the movement (Philippians 3:1-6). He experienced their dogged termination as they now followed his ministry wherever it went seeking to undo it and destroy Paul.

It seemed that their hatred of the Gentiles was such an obsession that it blinded them to the truth of the gospel. Since the gospel was extended to the Gentiles it was categorically rejected by many Jews as false. One cannot be too arrogant against the Jews for this. We must be sobered by the understanding that all such a position requires is a misinterpretation of Scripture, and an emotional presentation of the distortion. It then becomes entrenched.

This is the same phenomenon that led to the hatred of Jews in Europe, all done on the supposed authority of the Christian faith. The same twisting of the truth in Christian churches help fuel the segregation of blacks in America. We must embrace what Paul is speaking of here as a human problem not a Jewish one.

The Jews who believed, and there were many, became the strength of the early churches. The ones who did not believe became intense in their hatred of Christ. They openly declared themselves in God's name to be Christ's enemies. In this act they filled up their sin. Every sin can be forgiven. The final rejection of Christ cannot be since He is God's appointed sacrifice for sin. God knows when this rejection is final, though we do not.

When an individual commits this sin they begin to experience God's wrath. It is not they experience no more of his love. All men experience God's care for his creation. But those who reject Him align themselves against all He is doing and so experience His opposition to their works. The Jews as a group had rejected Jesus, and so it filled up the full measure of sin God allows and, in His mercy, tolerates without judgment.

The result of this action on their part was captured by Paul in the brief phrase, "wrath is come upon them to the utmost." The most natural way of reading this phrase would be "wrath is come upon them to the end." The Law had proclaimed to them that this would be the path they would choose due to their stubborn rebellious hearts (Deuteronomy 31:14-30). They were also told in the writings of Moses how God would respond to them in the "latter days" when they repented (Deuteronomy 4:30). At that time He would renew His grace toward them. But He would renew it by doing a spiritual work in them, giving them a new heart with capacity to obey him (Deuteronomy 29:4).

Paul understood this timetable during which God's wrath would make their lives very difficult. It included their rejection/punishment of Christ, the resultant destruction of Jerusalem, it's domination by the Gentiles (Jeremiah 29:10; Daniel 9:26), and finally their repentance/conversion/restoration at Christ's second coming (Romans 9-11). The phrase Paul uses here captures this understanding. It is a course of wrath that they would be caught in until the end of all earthly kingdoms, the time of Christ's appearance on earth. This is also spoken of in some detail in Romans chapter 11. Paul's phrase also captures in a few words the tone of the revelation given to Daniel (Daniel 9:24-27), and to John.

**2:17 "for we brethren, having been bereft of you for a short while in person not in spirit were all the more eager with great desire to see your face."**

Paul had applied earnest effort to bring about a visit to Thessalonica. He draws on a few words and expressions in this verse that combined to fill it with emotion. There is enormous feeling within Paul for the Thessalonians and this led him to put forth considerable effort to be with them. The word rendered bereft is a word that describes being comfortless. It utilizes the word for an orphan, and so expresses a personal loss one feels when separated from the closest of friendships.

Paul speaks of being with them "in spirit." The Greek word used by him here is heart. Paul expresses a presence with them in Thessalonica, and his belief in this was considerably more than our use of the expression "with you in heart." There was a belief on his part that through prayer and the bond of the Holy Spirit he could have actual ministry in faraway places (1 Corinthians 5:3).

This is no bizarre or spooky belief, such as might be present in the superstitions of spiritism or in New Age thought. It is simple faith in the actual organic unity, union, and oneness of the body of Christ. The Spirit of God inhabits each so that all are one, with no time or space limitation. Paul's belief in this organic unity strengthened his already strong belief in prayer. Prayer is the activity we engage in to accomplish work in all places, were we are both present or absent. When Paul said he was not separated from them "in heart," it was no mere emotional feeling. In fact, it ran somewhat contrary to his emotions. So the fact is that organic unity does not negate the feeling of separation. But it does eliminate the spatial limitations of separation to some degree.

**2:18 “for we wanted to come to you I, Paul more than once and yet Satan thwarted us.”**

Our plans to be in certain places at certain times can be thwarted by Satan. Most times Paul does not name Satan as the one who thwarts such plans (Romans 1:13; 1 Corinthians 1:15-17). Here he does name Satan directly, and that is an interesting idea. In the sovereignty of God, Satan blocked plans. The blockage is legitimate, so that it is accurate to say Satan is working evil. Yet we know that the purposes of God cannot be finally thwarted.

This means that we will experience blockages that we should not accept as God's will without repeated effort to overcome them. We should not expect that God's power negates the need for us to fight the fight. The imagery of warfare is abundant in the New Testament and so we should see each moment as a fight for objectives that will be contested. Satan can and does block those things that even angels are sent to do (Daniel 10:10-14). Sometimes as Paul did here, we do not carry the day. Though it is certain who will win the war in the end, there are times when objectives are simply not able to be gained.

What are we to surmise that about the power of evil? It is a bigger issue of course, than this that is mentioned in passing by Paul here. But from this we conclude simply that Satan has legitimate power that can and does effectively hinder. We should expect to experience the very thing Paul mentions here.

**2:19 “for who is our hope our joy our crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming?”**

What is the source of the kinds of emotions that re-energize us and cause those engaged in the mission to fight another day? That is the subject Paul is touching on in this verse. The “what” is in Paul's mind a “who”. Ministry is about people, the most precious resource on the planet by the Creator's reckoning. His plan is all about redeeming fallen humanity. So among those who understand the Creator, people become what they live for. The redeemed become their possession even as they are God's precious possession. The community of those who have embraced the gospel and invested themselves in it become that which fulfills their life and their days. Therefore Paul wants to be in the company of the Thessalonians, because it would strengthen and encourage his own heart.

He mentions the Lord's coming once again, because it is the event in which we will find worth and fulfillment and reward for all we've done as His ministers. This is the hope that Paul held out to believers in all his writings. The lack of meaning and personal fulfillment every human feels has only one solution. The solution is the restored rule of God in the affairs of earth. This is the Christian's hope. It is not that they realize their joy here and now in Christ. Their hope and joy and reward will come when He redeems the earth through His redeemed ones (Romans 8:19-25).

This is an event that is paramount to Paul. It was important that the church think rightly about it. Paul's letter will take aim at providing clear information about the return of Christ. It happens that each of the chapter divisions we have added to his letter end with a statement on the return of Christ. It is the recurring theme of his message. We must give proper attention to it in our teaching. It has great pastoral significance as it provides a theology of hope that holds up in the midst of hopeless

situations. The world offers nothing but Band-Aid fixes and momentary experiences of joy. The event of Christ's return has substance that will cure despair.

## **2:20 “for you are our glory and joy.”**

When Adam and Eve fell and the glory of humanity was lost, when they knew they were naked, they were ashamed. Humanity has been searching for glory ever since. Glory concerns that which is weighty and of significance, that which makes one marvel and celebrate. Joy refers to that inner state of rest and peace. It is a quietness of the soul. Paul names the Thessalonians as the source of these things to him.

This makes sense from a theological point of view. Humanity lost the glory and God set about restore it. His most important command, that upon which the rest of revelation rests is this, to love God and to love your neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40). In a partnership of love between Paul, God, and the Thessalonians, Paul was realizing the joy and glory of God through God's people. In loving people we love God and they experience the love of God. We through their love experience God's love. Humanity finds their lost glory and joy in loving God and loving others. This we will fully experience when Christ returns and we enter into a more complete experience of the new covenant. In the meantime, the relationships experienced in the body of Christ are our glory and joy.

## 1 Thessalonians 3

**3:1 “therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone;”**

We read in Acts 17 the riot caused by the Jews in Thessalonica caused Paul to move on to Berea. However, the Jews from Thessalonica found out he was in Berea and came there and stirred up the people against him. Paul traveled some distance south to Athens, likely by sea. Acts tells us that Paul waited in Athens for Silas and Timothy to meet him there.

We are uncertain of the time frame involved in the stay in Athens. Paul went from there to Corinth and we believe wrote this letter from there. It appears that Paul stayed in Athens briefly until Timothy and Silas arrived, eventually sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, and went himself to Corinth. Timothy and Silas eventually returned from Thessalonica and joined Paul who was ministering there with Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:5).

What we read in these verses is an account of Paul's concerns, feelings, and actions that are behind the scenes recorded in Luke's account in Acts. He speaks to the concerns that began to develop in his heart for the faith of the Thessalonians, and others in Macedonia once Silas and Timothy joined him in Athens. In view of this concern, he was willing to remain in Athens alone so the spiritual need of the young church in Thessalonica might be well provided for.

He speaks here of being so concerned he could “endure no longer”. We have no way of knowing if this anxiety was of God or himself. It was likely a bit of both. The daily concern for the churches was a source of stress that Paul felt (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). There's a fine line we must walk of passionate concern, as parents for children, and trust in God when it comes to the welfare of our portion of the mission. We will not take the mission too far if we do not care. But we must believe in God's power to sustain others through the Holy Spirit or we stray into a fleshly anxiety. The emotional life of the Spirit filled Christian is not stress-free. But neither should it be characterized by a lack of peace and rest.

**3:2 “and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith,”**

Timothy is called God's fellow worker in the gospel. That is high ground to rise to. It is mentioned just in passing. It is a testimony of God's redemptive work. It is that for which humanity was created. It is a privilege that evil robbed them of. So it is an important little descriptive title from a theological point of view. It comes to all who allow God's salvation to move toward completion in them.

In sending Timothy, Paul was sending his best (Philippians 2:20). It cost him from the standpoint of companionship but served a greater concern for the spiritual health and progress of the Thessalonians.

**3:3 “so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.”**

A quick read of Acts 16 and 17 shows the Paul’s work in the Macedonian province of Achaia was fraught with danger and difficulty. It was bitterly opposed by the Jews. Paul knew that this opposition stirred up by the Jews would persist. When he speaks of being destined to such trouble, he is speaking both from the historical and the prophetic perspective (Matthew 5:10-12; 23:32-39). Jesus taught that this reaction to the truth had always followed God’s messengers. It followed Him, and it would follow those who determined to follow Him (Matthew 10:16-33).

The key for the Christian is to not be disturbed by such things. The word used here by Paul is σαίνεισθαι, which is the term that was used in the plain literal sense to describe the wagging of the dog’s tail. So it describes an impulsive reaction and movement. God wants to give us composure and stability in the face of that which might shake us. It is normal to be shaken and is normal with the Spirit’s help from within and through others to experience composure.

Paul sends Timothy at the prompting of the Holy Spirit so that he might be used by the Spirit to minister that which would settle the Thessalonians. The more mature must provide this. They must think of how to be used of God to minister such settledness, because it is in short supply. Without such ministry the instincts of flight and fear take over. The result is that there are many casualties among those of incomplete faith.

**3:4 “for indeed when we’re with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass as you know.”**

During the short time Paul was in Thessalonica, he warned them of this. It could have been that he repeated the general principle that all who live godly lives will suffer persecution. It could be he sensed the rumblings in Thessalonica and knew that this would be a certainty in that city. His warning is repeated here. He wanted to reassure them in this letter that this was not an extraordinary thing they were going through. It was normal. They are not living the life wrongly and God was not absent. In fact, their experience of affliction was affirmation of the message they receive from Paul, of Paul himself and of them. It had come true just as Paul’s words had predicted.

None of this is to say we are to seek out persecution and alienate people as a means of affirmation. That can be a fleshly quagmire we fall into and Christians in some areas have fallen into it. We are to do everything in our power to make the truth palatable without changing it or leaving parts of it undeclared. We are to conduct ourselves in a way that pleases God and pray that people accept it (2 Corinthians 2:14-17; 4:1-6).

**3:5 “for this reason, when we could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain.”**

Because of the affliction Paul knew would come their way and the fact that it hit like a storm, Paul had great concern for the ability of the fledgling church to survive. He got to a point where he just had to know what their condition was in Thessalonica. He could endure the unknown no longer. And so he sent Timothy to find out their spiritual condition



Like newborn animals in the wild, new believers are vulnerable to predators. Satan seeks to render useless the faith of new believers and so Paul knew he would have been at work among the Thessalonians. It is not that Satan can undo the work of God in a believer, but he can so entangle individuals that they do not take the next steps God has for them. They are hindered from the rest of God's salvation plan for them. The thing God would have them rise above continues to hold them down. The things God would have them pour their lives into, are neglected for other things that capture their interest. The result is the labor of those that brought them to faith is in vain. Though forgiven they never rise to that which God has for them. They can even become bitter toward those who brought them to faith, and toward the truth. Paul was afraid that this might happen in Thessalonica. It was to this end that he sent Timothy to them so that the need for nurture encouragement might be met.

**3:6 “but now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also want to see you,”**

Timothy had gone to Thessalonica and returned, and we have no way of knowing how long he was there. But he brings back good news to Paul, who by now had traveled on to Corinth. Paul was heartened by three things.

First, Paul was heartened by the faith of the Thessalonians. They continue to trust in the truth as Paul had delivered to them. Earlier, Paul had mentioned that this trust of theirs had brought about work (1:3), and that is the ultimate confirmation that faith is healthy and being practiced (James 2:16). Timothy had recounted stories of the work they were doing, and this proved to Paul their healthy trust in the truth he had brought to them.

Second, Paul mentions their love. This too is mentioned earlier (1:2). The presence of love authenticates the presence of truth and leads many more to embrace it (John 13:35). This love produced labor (1:3), a consistent going above and beyond the norm in relationships.

The third thing mentioned by Paul is the kind thoughts they had toward himself and those who labored with him. Paul had left Thessalonica abruptly, having stirred up much public opinion against the new Christians. Some of their own had been apprehended and had posted some type of bond to obtain their release (Acts 17:9). In the aftermath of such a thing, the leader would be concerned about people's willingness to have them back. Paul is touched by the fact that the Thessalonians long for him even as he did for them. This was a sure sign that they had received him not just as another man, but as the messenger to them from God.

**3:7 “for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith.”**

Any spiritual leader faces distress and affliction. The spiritual progress of others is what lightens their load. The faith of the Thessalonians provided comfort to Paul and his company. When we understand the full picture of what God is doing in the universe, we come to understand the relative significance of events and achievements. There is immense significance in being a part of the spiritual progress of others and immense privilege in handling those things which are of such precious value to God. That is a perspective that shrinks the relative significance of our trial (2 Corinthians 4:17).

**3:8 “for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.**

The word “really” was added in the NASB in order to try to capture Paul’s intent in using the word live. It is an expression of the deep emotion and joy produced in him by the news of the Thessalonian’s healthy faith. He was expressing the renewed zest for ministry he felt.

All who are spiritual leaders know this deep sense of gratification that comes with seeing others progress in these most important matters (1 John 1:4; 3 John 4). There is no greater sense of fulfillment.

But where there is such potential for fulfillment, there is also potential for sadness. There is no greater concern that can weigh on a leader then when the spiritual growth and progress of those who they lead is blocked or endangered from without or within. There is a preoccupation that comes with spiritual leadership, a concern for internal matters running in the background of the mind always. While others play there is a burden to pray. While they can celebrate, the leader is already pondering the next objective.

This carries with it a spiritual danger of its own. The work can easily become one’s own, and that always leads to catastrophic failure. The element of faith can easily be replaced by mere human effort, and the flesh never brings about anything but spiritual death. We must remember that anxiety crosses over rather quickly and easily into a failure of faith. In the end, spiritual work has its Gethsemane’s. But these must not evolve from genuine prayerful struggle into fear of our own failure and a fleshly craving for things like stability, predictability, outward success, acclaim, and commendation. What Paul and the Apostles and the Lord did in their sleepless nights and long days should not be confused with the similar looking lifestyle that develops where there is a fleshly need to succeed and prove one’s worth.

Paul managed this challenge even as we must. There is every reason to imagine that he had good and bad days in this challenge. How much of the emotion he describes in these verses was the result of his own humanness and how much was Spirit-lead remains open to speculation. One thing is certain. God inspires concern and care in leaders. They cannot lead and be fit for the kingdom of God without it. 2 Corinthians 2:14–7:5 provides much insight into all that Paul employed to manage this stress.

**3:9 “for what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account,”**

There is a great sense that one has been blessed when God uses them to bring about spiritual growth in others. The blessing leaves one humbled in God’s presence. There is no sense of contentment deeper than that felt in those moments when one knows they have been entrusted with kingdom matters.

When Yahweh informed David of his intention to bless his seed and to bring through his offspring the One who would rule his people forever, David could only express humility and simple gratitude (2 Samuel 7:18-29). There is a certain speechlessness and helplessness that comes over us when we rightly understand what has just happened.

This is the feeling we sense in Paul’s words here. It is the feeling that comes with being a vessel for honorable use (2 Timothy 2:20-21). In considering the next verse we will see that God is doing through Paul an equally staggering thing in these circumstances as he did for David. God uses people to bring us this joy. It is true that there are Judases. It is also true that there are those like the other 11. The Thessalonians were this to Paul. When such people emerge in your life, it is impossible to find adequate expression of thanks.

**3:10 “as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith.”**

Paul’s concern for the Thessalonians was deep. There was the affection involved in personal relationship, that led him to long to see them, but there was also the concern expressed here. Their faith lacked something.

We know that Paul’s departure from Thessalonica was abrupt and that he wasn’t there long. There was a limit to how much he could have imparted to them in terms of both doctrinal and practical matters. The result was that there was a deficit that he thought and prayed for night and day. He could not shake his concern.

From our vantage point we can see what a portion of that deficit in their faith was and why God did not allow Paul to return to them as quickly as he wished. We see in both Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians much information on Christ’s return. It is information which is not given anywhere else in Scripture. The circumstances that had hindered Paul were of Satan (2:18). But God used them to put in writing for the church for the millenniums that followed truth about the return of Jesus Christ. Their lack of information on this caused them to be deficient in hope (4:13). Faith needs information that leads to belief in that about which information is lacking. It involves things hoped for. Things can only be hoped for if we know the possibility of their existence. The Thessalonians needed more teaching on the resurrection that would occur at Christ’s return. Their lack of information, the thing, which was tugging at Paul’s heartstrings, ended up profitable for the church in the ages to come.

We simply cannot know all that God is doing through our circumstances. One thing is certain. If we are faithful in the matters that are his heart, we will accomplish the work for Him that He really needs to get done through us. We may do so without ever knowing what that work is. In this case Paul’s “night and Day” prayers were bringing about a result that would have astounded him beyond the feeling of inexpressible thanksgiving expressed earlier in this sentence.

**3:11 “Now may our God and Father himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;”**

Paul’s desire and strong wish was to spend time personally with the Thessalonians. As always, he was entrusting the timing of that visit to God. Paul wanted his direction to be of God himself in this matter, and he felt he would need it because there were obstacles to his visit. The actual obstacles he faced in going to Thessalonica have not been plainly stated. It has only been said that Satan was thwarting their efforts to visit Thessalonica (2:18). This Paul knew was not an obstacle to God, though a significant one to himself and the Thessalonians. Paul was confident in the power of God in such matters and knew that he himself had only to await God’s timing.

This verse begins a statement of Paul’s prayer and desire for the Thessalonians during this indefinite period that would pass before he was with them again. Before he could act to strengthen their faith, he wanted their faith to be continually built up. Verses 11-13 contain his prayer and hope for them in his absence.

**3:12 “and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all men, just as we also do for you.”**

Paul knew that the essence of obedience to God, once one had submitted to Him, was to love others. He also knew that a huge part of maintaining the spiritual health of any churches was to keep people behaving in love. Love is what advances the mission. So Paul prays that the Lord would cause an increase in their love so that it would be in abundant supply.

A large part of the work God does in the life of every individual is to strengthen their love for others. It is fair to say that this is so on His heart that there is something He brings into the lives of each of His children daily that is designed to grow them in love. It is rare for God to make such a quality as love to simply appear in our lives. Rather, such qualities are brought about through process.

In the case of love, God brings into our lives both those who give us love and those who require it. Both are essential to growth in love. We can only love others as we ourselves are loved. And we receive love as we love others and give ourselves to serving them. So there is a cyclical nature to growing in love. We give love, and as we give it we receive it, which then enables us to give even more. We are renewed in love by initiating love ourselves—by giving.

To pray for growth in love is a strategic prayer. The person who loves others goes a long way in portraying Christ to those around them and so does much to strengthen the mission. The truth is authenticated through love so that those who proclaim and teach it find receptive hearts and minds in their audiences.

**3:13 “so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”**

We have here another mention of the coming of Jesus Christ. It is once again portrayed as the hope and end toward which Christians should live their lives.

The prayer, beginning in verse 11, is that the Thessalonians would abound in love, and that this result in verse 13 would be brought about through that love. A life of love leads to what Paul calls the heart established in blamelessness and holiness. The word

established means to be grounded and to have permanence and stability. Used in respect to a kingdom it means endurance. Used of a boat it means moorage.

So this prayer is for stability in our inner beings. It is the desire and purpose of God to give us what we need to keep advancing in our experience of the life He gives. That happens only when we become stabilized in it, meaning settled into all that keeps us growing as Christ followers. So stabilized in this case does not mean unchanging.

Instability in our walk includes bouts with slavery to sin, ignorance of God's will, lapses in practices that He has called us to. But it is important to realize that instability can still be true when many habits and routines are practiced. Are we apart from Him relationally or in terms of what the Bible calls fellowship? That is the question. All of the things that characterize us when that happens are not His desire for us. But really His desire for us is that we be in close relationship with Him. All the forces of heaven are aimed at helping us develop this stability.

At the coming of Christ God's desire is that we would be people who have stewarded the truth well, people whom He can reward, by His grace, for the faithfulness we have displayed. This He longs to do. In fact, this is the ultimate display of His grace that He will reward us for all which He Himself brought about in us!

This is the big day/era that Christians should live for. There is tremendous hope do to this eventuality of Him returning with His reward in hand (Isaiah 40:10; Revelation 22: 12). The judgments that He makes that day will stand for all eternity. That is both a sobering thought and a delightful one. This great fact is why it is critical that we make progress in the journey toward blamelessness and holiness. These are the things He wishes to produce in our inner beings. Who we have become in our inner beings will be put on display for His glory on that day (Luke 12:1-3).

It is the judgment of God that Jesus will carry out on that day. He is the Christ, meaning the anointed one, the one designated to be the visible ruler of all that is. He is the God/man, the designated sin-bearer who by His blood has redeemed people from every tribe and nation. These will be part of His company when He comes to earth and they will carry out His rule on it.

Paul will be very definitive in the next chapter in that none who believe in the gospel will miss that day. Those who died will be raised from the dead in new bodies. Those alive will be transformed and given new bodies. Together they will come with Christ in His glory to reign on earth (Revelation 20:4-6).

In this prayer there is the more visible work God wants to do of bringing us to a point of love for one another. Then there is the resulting work that flows from that of a certain assurance in our hearts. He wants us to have a confident standing before Him at His coming (Hebrews 10:38-39). He wants our relationship with Him to have progressed beyond all the more normal fear-dominated, impersonal routines that characterized our beginnings.

## 1 Thessalonians 4

**4:1 “Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you receive from us instructions as to how you want to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more.”**

We see in the opening words of this verse the tone of Paul’s leadership that he had compared earlier to that of a mother and a father (1 Thessalonians 2:5-12). Though his authority as an apostle was such that he could have demanded a certain level of moral excellence from people like the Thessalonians, his approach was to request and exhort. He does so in Jesus’ name, not by the flaunting of his own position. That is a great example for all who are in leadership today.

Paul is exhorting them to a pattern of living in the practical matters of life. That is what the word “walk” always speaks of. It is the pathway of choice that one allows themselves to take in life’s everyday details. There is a pattern in such matters that the apostles set down that is not to be set aside or compromised. It is not open to revision and is not to evolve. That is a critical matter that each generation of leaders must steward well as they shape the church.

Paul says that the instruction they had passed on to the Thessalonians pleased God. That is because it is from Him, being what He prescribed when He became a man and what He Himself lived. Paul will reinforce this idea in verse two.

We know that pleasing God does not have to do with the classic need humanity feels to make oneself acceptable to God. It is to be understood as living in the way that harmonizes with His will for us, the way that He has marked out and provided fully for in us. It glorifies Him and so is best for us and restores our glory as humans. It is the way He is leading us and so marks the path that harmonizes our mind with His. It is a way of living that He empowers. It allows us to experience answered prayer and impact in His kingdom. Such a life is His gift to us through Jesus.

Paul affirms the Thessalonian’s presence on this pathway, and then calls them to excel even more. That tells us that there are levels of Spirit-enabled living that we can either rise to or fail to rise to. There is a continual “stepping up” that should be happening in the Christian community because that is the way of Yahweh in His salvation plan for us. In the verses that lie ahead Paul will give specifics of this pattern in key areas of our individual lives.

**4:2 “for you know what commandment we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.”**

The instruction given to the church is from the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not an arbitrary morality. It is a divine standard. It is that which God lived when He became a man. It is that standard to which all humanity will be held accountable. It is what should be taught in the church and modeled by it. It is not a mystery. It is a lifestyle that has been demonstrated by Him, is enabled by Him, and made fully known to us.

**4:3 “for this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is that you abstain from sexual immorality;”**

People often imagine the leading of the Lord in a moral direction that is clearly not His will. They mistake their inner drive as the leading of the Holy Spirit. Among Christians it is ironic that there are always people imagining that it is somehow in God’s will and plan to be unfaithful to their spouse, to walk away from their marriage, to be involved in homosexual affairs, and a host of things that are immoral by the standard these verses call Christian people to.

God’s will is stated in a general way in this verse and then that general principle is applied more specifically. God’s plan for us is our sanctification. That word means that He has reserved us for special use. We are not to see ourselves as being like everybody else on the planet. His plan of salvation is that we be saved from living by the whims of our instincts. We are to be different than animals. Yahweh has set us aside to be instruments through which He will bring salvation, in the broadest sense of that term, to others.

Our sanctification, the process of separating ourselves from those things that He has asked us to discard, is an ongoing process. The Scripture is vital to that process. It reveals to us those things Yahweh wants us to be separated from. The Holy Spirit is also vital to the process. He is a witness within us, working through our own thoughts, to illuminate the path we are to walk. Our cooperation is vital to the process in that we must make a few decisions based on the standard of Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Our minds are the battleground, and the enemy is both ourselves and the evil one. Sanctification is a labor we must take up each moment, but there is no greater act of worship and there is no more rewarding pursuit.

Paul goes on to name specifically sexual immorality. He uses a term that covers a wide range of sexual deviance. The term is πορνεία. God’s design of humanity includes our sexuality. We do not know how that was specifically affected in the fall. We only know that it became, like so many other things, an area of liability to us. Relatively early in the story of Scripture, though definitive information is absent, there were boundaries being violated with respect to sexuality (Genesis 6:1-5; 9:20-27). More specific information is given in the story of the wickedness of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-11).

The subject of sexuality is not given an abrupt introduction into the text of Scripture. Rather, it becomes a part of it rather naturally along with all the other complications that were brought about as evil did its work on the earth. And so it was natural that moral standards related to sexuality be made known. We are not told anything about when these were given. We only know that they were known (Genesis 20:1-7).

By the time of the giving of the old covenant such standards were quite detailed. Adultery, bestiality, and homosexuality were all prohibited (Leviticus 18:20, 22, 23). Sexual relationships with relatives were prohibited (Leviticus 18:6). Sexual relations outside of marriage were prohibited (Exodus 22:16-17). Rape was prohibited (Deuteronomy 22:23-29).

And so we see that from the beginning God’s will was that His people live by different standards of sexuality. That made them entirely separate from the world. Paul could say very definitively that this was the will of God for believers. There is no doubt at all in the record. Sexual activity outside of the boundaries established and revealed by God does not need to be prayed over or pondered as possibly of Him. It is not His will for us.

#### **4:4 “that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,”**

The overall message of this verse is clear, that there is personal responsibility that each individual must exercise in the area of sexual morality. This area of our lives should be governed by what is honorable and by God’s standard of distinctness and holiness that is made clearly known to us.

The specific instruction given in this verse is a little nebulous. Its uncertainty is brought about by two words. These 2 words were rendered in NASB with the words “possess” and the word “vessel”. The word rendered “possess” is κατασθαι. Its meaning can be understood as to give or acquire or own. It is used seven times in the New Testament. In its uses outside this verse it always means to procure or purchase, rather than possess.

The word rendered vessel, σκευος, means a jug or bowl or pot, common containers used in the day for a number of things. It is also used of ships. Figuratively, it is used of human beings. In fact, Paul uses it exclusively of human beings (Romans 9:21, 22, 23; 2 Corinthians 4:7; 2 Timothy 2:20-21). So this word could be referring to one’s own being, or some have understood it as referring to one’s wife. The gender of the term is neuter. It is used by Peter in connection with wives (1 Peter 3:7), but it is not a term there for a wife.

If we take the word rendered possesses meaning procure, then the term wife fits well. The instruction would be a command to procure one’s own wife in an honorable, and sanctified way. The idea would be to have your own wife and enjoy sexual relations with her. Don’t sleep around before or after marriage would be the application. This would be in line with God’s provision for sexual expression.

This interpretation has the advantage of using the term “possess” as it is more generally used in Scripture in the sense of obtaining or procuring or purchasing. Its disadvantage is that it understands the word “vessel” in a way that it is not used in Scripture, it was used rather coarsely of a wife in rabbinical writings. Paul’s words can be construed to be a rather undignified treatment of marriage if taken in this way.

We can take the word rendered “possess” as meaning acquire, it’s normal usage. We can then take the word “vessel” and understand it in the way Paul normally uses it, of one’s own being. In this case the exhortation would be understood as redeeming through the power of the Holy Spirit one’s own being for honorable and sanctified use (as in 2 Timothy 2:20-21). This would fit well in the context that follows, which would be understood then as a call for moral dealings in all areas of our lives in the world.

Sanctification has implications in our sexuality and in our dealings in business.

Some have suggested that the entire context is addressing both sexual morality and morality in business. They suggest that in the original language acquire should be understood as following the word vessel. That would make the verse read in the following way: “Everyone of you should understand (treat honorably, i.e., 5:1 to) his own wife, and to acquire (i.e., to do business), in sanctification and honor.” If we take the verse in this way, it is talking about two subjects marriage and business.

This interpretation has much to commend it, though it demands that Paul have used a rather coarse term for wife. However this could be something he intentionally does if it was a common usage of the men of the culture, and he deliberately offsets that notion by calling them to understand their wives. The term “know” he will use in this way in



5:12. So there is much to support this interpretation, though none of the translators have chosen to inject the punctuation in the text that this meaning requires.

However, one chooses to understand the particulars of the verse, it is a summons to a life governed by holiness and honor. Holiness concerns itself with the standard of God. Honor is concerned with both the standard of God and the expectation of honorable men. The message of the verse is straight-forward. We must intentionally engage the process of sanctification, and view it as urgent business. If we are not “feeling it”, it is because we are not in tune with the heart of God.

#### **4:5 “not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God.”**

There is to be a pronounced difference between the Christian’s morality and that of those with no knowledge of Yahweh. It is to lead to distinctly different behavior in the home and in the community.

The knowledge of God is not seen as true knowledge of Him until it has transformed our behavior. Until then true understanding and perception has not occurred, the person is still walking in darkness. The implications of truth may be grasped rather slowly, but when they are grasped, life change is produced. People are who they are because of their understanding of the truth or their posture toward it.

But the mere fact that Paul is having to give these instructions to a group of believers, and a commendable group at that, shows that this spiritual understanding is not an all-at-once thing. Neither is such spiritual understanding a once-done-always-done matter. There is constant danger of deception, wrong thinking, and bad company that can cause us to slip backwards in terms of our relationship to the truth. Therefore the Scripture commands diligence and alertness.

It is the knowledge of God and His truth that is to shape our response to our own desires. We are to rule over them. Those who do not have this knowledge are said to be driven by a “passionate desire”. The contrast is unmistakable. The child of God lives by a standard and exercises self-control. There is a dignity to the pattern of life chosen. The others live by impulse. The need of the moment, the emotion of the moment, the inner yearning of the moment, shapes their behavior. They share more in common with animals in living this way than they do with God. They reflect Earth’s image rather than their Creator’s image by their sexual expression.

Paul uses two words to describe this common force that operates within us and shapes our sexual behavior. The NASB renders these two words with the phrase “lustful passion”. The two words are *παθη* and *επιθυμιας*. *παθη* occurs only three times in the New Testament, always to describe sexual behavior that is unrestrained. (Romans 1:26; Colossians 3:5). Its proper meaning is to suffer. So the idea of the word itself is to describe sensation or impression, usually painful ones. The term *επιθυμιας* describes strong desire, both good (Luke 22:15) and evil (John 8:44). So the two words have overlap in meaning and so describe one who allows themselves to be driven along in a course of behavior. By using two words the idea of the absence of restraint is clearly emphasized. In this way it is pointedly communicated that such passion and instinct that results in no restraint is not God-directed, and so is to be avoided.

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

In matters of sexuality, Paul’s message was that there are clear boundaries that believers are to function within. He used two words in the previous verse to describe that which shapes the sexual activity of those functioning outside the spirit of truth. Both terms describe passionate sensation that drives one along. Here he uses two terms to describe what Christians do that leads them to the same sort of activity. The terms “transgress” and “defraud” both describe over-reaching, a way of behaving that goes beyond the prescribed limit. So Christians can and do step beyond sexual boundaries. They engage in behavior that exceeds one’s right. They are in violation of God’s justice, a fact Paul gives great emphasis to.

Paul was apparently concerned about sexual immorality within the church, since he speaks here of defrauding one’s brother. When we fail to live out the redemptive power of God that transforms our own beings from being vessels of dishonor into vessels of honor, the result inevitably is that we defraud other believers. This over-reaching, fraudulent course of action is something we must not allow.

The picture of the Lord as an avenger is not pleasant. This imagery we have largely eliminated from our Christian vocabulary today. The word is used only one other time in the New Testament (Romans 13:4). It is a compound word formed from the preposition εκ, meaning “out of” and the word δικη, meaning right or just. So it refers to God as one who responds out of His sense of what is right and just. His grace does not keep Him from enforcing the rights of those were unjustly treated, even if the oppression, comes by the hand of one of His own children. When we let ourselves drift morally, not allowing the redemptive power of God to transform us, we can find ourselves behaving unjustly. Then Paul warns us that we will face the enforcement by God of His justice. Our deeds will come back on us.

This solemn warning is missing from much of our perspective today. Paul’s words in this are penetrating and forceful and cannot be softened (see Genesis 20:1-7; 2 Samuel 12:1-14). Paul says of himself that he is attesting earnestly to this.

**4:7 “for God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.”**

Paul makes this appeal based on the sphere into which God has called us. We have been called to Him and into his Kingdom. That is, by his very nature, a summons into the sphere of His Holiness. It is twisted and contradictory to imagine him leaving us to engage in that which violates His nature. It would be a cruel God that would do such a thing.

The word uncleanness is often used in Scripture, particularly in the Pentateuch, which lays out the laws that govern Israel’s worship system. All sorts of things were declared unclean by God with respect to His covenant community. It was not that such things were unclean by their nature. This is clear from the teaching of the new covenant (Mark 7:19; 1 Timothy 4:1-5). But He was willing to declare certain foods, animals, and human bodily conditions unclean. This was no small matter. It produced a great deal of extra routine even trouble for the average person. Why was God willing to do this when it wasn’t real and actual uncleanness? Why this massive exercise?

While this is a complex matter that raises thorny issues, it seems that the primary purpose of God was to demonstrate humanity's inadequacy to save themselves. We are utterly dependent on God for our morality. (Matthew 21:28-32) Jesus made it clear that what makes us unclean is not what we eat or drink, but what resides within us (Mark 7:19).

Laws involving cleanness/uncleanness demonstrated first, that simple external, somewhat artificial uncleanness is a consuming matter that takes us to our moral limit and beyond to cope with. Second, that uncleanness is our natural state. It simply comes our way because of living normal life. Even things that are essential to human life can render us unclean under the terms of the old covenant (Leviticus 15:16-19). Such laws were particularly important in that they illustrated the role of motives in human sinfulness. Even doing what is of God can render us unclean. Third, that the human conscience is defiled. Our only innate guide can in the end, only do what we tell it to do. We have no innate moral compass. The result is that we have peace where we should not and have guilt where we should not. We are dependent on God and His truth for any reliable moral direction. Our conscience, though by God's grace a source of basic morality, cannot provide sufficient moral energy to free us from sin. It simply falls short in the task of making us righteous.

God has called us away from the direction that our defiled conscience leads us in. He is not calling us to mirror external obedience and conformity. He is calling us to purity within. He is summoning us to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. The result He is seeking is our sanctification. He is determined to bring about a difference in us from humanity's mainstream that renders us different at our very core. His Spirit is joined to ours for this purpose, to bring cleanness to our very core being.

**4:8 “consequently, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”**

Paul started this exhortation by saying that sanctification is God's will for us. This we can count on. God is calling us to be separate and distinct in matters of morality, character, values, and purpose. We do not need to search this issue out except to understand its particulars.

It is a principle of God that if we reject what He has revealed to us, we will not have more of this truth revealed to us (Matthew 13:10-16; 21:33-46; Mark 4:24-25; Luke 8:180). Paul was touching on this principle here. We have an obligation with respect to the command of God we clearly know. Our fruitfulness in searching out God's more personal and specific individual will for us will be limited if we are not submitting to His revealed will. We are rejecting Him by setting aside His commandment with respect to our morality.

Paul reminds us that God who has called us to sanctification is the one who has given us His Spirit. He is reminding us of an important linkage between submission and the ongoing experience of God's strengthening power. Where we set aside what we know to be God's will, we are choosing to set aside His power. Our experience of His Spirit's promptings and urgings will be impacted. In other places Paul commands that we do not quench the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19), or grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). Intentional sin, or sin carried out due to inattentiveness to revelation, damages our own experience of Christ. This should keep us from choosing to leave the path His word has marked out. Rejecting a command of God compromises our own experience of His Spirit.

**4:9 “now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;”**

The Thessalonians church was a loving church. The next verse will describe the scope of that love. It is impressive. But first we have this remarkable commendation by Paul of the church at Thessalonica. This has probably been true of very few churches throughout history. In the teachings of Christ to the church at its inception, love was paramount (John 13:34–35). In the thought of Paul love was presented as the highest Christian virtue, above faith (1 Corinthians 13:3). It is hard to imagine a higher compliment than this that Paul delivers. There had been a special work of love done by the Spirit and Thessalonica.

This seems to be characteristic of churches, that each has its own strengths and shows the fingerprint of God in a unique way. It may well be that this is simply a product of those who lead the local church. It takes on their personality and follows their journey. But this idea, that the church takes on the character of its leaders must not be taken too far. There is no such blanket statement made in Scripture to this effect. In fact, there are ample examples of people not imitating their leaders throughout the Bible.

The key element of the spiritual health mentioned here is that the people were “taught of God.” This happens where there is faithful, Spirit-enabled declaration being made of God’s heart and where there are people with good hearts, listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and applying the truth to their real-life situations. That is the environment in which the transformational power of the gospel becomes very visible. It attracts those listening to God, even while repelling those not listening to Him (2 Corinthians 2:14–16).

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

The Thessalonians loved well within their own community of believers. It would be commendable if just that were said of them. But their love spread to the churches in neighboring towns and cities in their province. This is even more significant when we realize the limits to their transportation and communication. How exactly this love was expressed is unknown to us.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul writes to the Corinthians about the great work of God’s grace that had been witnessed in Macedonia. He is talking about the exceptional level of giving that had come about among them to help relieve the need to the churches in Jerusalem/Judea. They gave in spite of their “deep poverty” (2 Corinthians 8:1–3). This was likely testimony to the Thessalonian church. From what is written here we can surmise that they were the spark plug of this explosion of love in the province of Macedonia. The Thessalonians loved well and inspired others in the same way.

Paul still saw that they could “excel still more”. For love there is an inexhaustible need, and in Christ there is an inexhaustible supply. We can always see the need for more love as we seek to touch people. We will always be aware of arriving at the end of our own love for others. We’ll get there rather quickly if we are honest with ourselves. It is precisely for those times this command was written. There is always love from God that He will supply for us to demonstrate for Him. There will be ample for what the moment calls for. Our own emotional emptiness need not limit us. We too can excel still more in love always.

**4:11 “and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you.”**

The Thessalonians loved well. Paul wanted them to love even more skillfully. This instruction is a part of that thought. This is his instruction about what they are to be driven toward what was to be their ambition in their display of love.

The phrase “make it your ambition” is the rendering of a single word in the Greek text. It is a compound word φιλοτιμεισθαι, a compound composed of word meaning “love,” and the word meaning “honor.” It is used two other times in the New Testament, both by Paul. Once it is rendered “strive” in Romans 15:20. The other time it is rendered “labor” (2 Corinthians 5:9). It expresses a drive or a desire to achieve a specific thing valued as honorable. So Paul calls the Thessalonians to point themselves toward a certain honorable result and to pursue it without wavering.

The specific result Paul wanted was for them to lead a “quiet life.” The etymology of the word implies sitting or sedentary. But that is not its usage. It is used most frequently in the New Testament of ceasing from resistance and giving up a protest or argument (Luke 14:4; Acts 11:18, 21:14). It is “taking one’s seat” as opposed to presenting arguments and dissenting opinion in a discussion. On one occasion it refers to the rest appropriate to the Sabbath (Luke 23:56), a rest of renewal and re-focus. Generally then it refers to a peaceful settledness, as opposed to anxious and vexed busyness with affairs other than one’s own. Ironically, to arrive at this state of settledness requires a certain drive or ambition. So Paul is not calling the readers to be sedentary, but to be purposefully occupied. He has in mind a ceasing from one course of action and a taking up of another course of action. Both have to do in some way with excelling at love.

The busyness Paul calls them to is what he describes as “doing your own things.” This phrase refers to personal things that every individual must take responsibility for and attend to. Paul has in mind everything from one’s personal devotional life, to one’s occupation, to the paying bills.

We surmise that there is an important clue to the meaning of this verse in Paul’s second letter to Thessalonica. In that letter he says, “for we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. But such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet (same root word), fashion and eat their own bread.” (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12). So the Thessalonians were disengaging in an unhealthy way from the normal personal affairs and rhythms of life. It was enjoyable, and many loving deeds were being done.

What was Paul’s concern with such a movement? He knew such a love movement could not sustain itself. In the long run, there are only things to share where things are being produced. To excel at love we must have of this world’s goods to share. If everyone sells what they have and quits work, a wonderful life comes into being, like the one we see described in Acts 4:32-35. But it cannot sustain itself, and soon wealth from outside the fellowship will have to be appropriated in some way. To excel at love we must work and earn and produce what is needed.

Paul goes on to delineate these very things. He summons them to working with their hands. In other words, they are to be productive. They are to remain engaged with their normal occupation. This is the engine that makes love possible and drives the mission forward. It is the activity that makes the care of those in need possible (Ephesians 4:28). There are those called to ministry who are to be paid for it (Matthew

10:10; Luke 10:7; 1 Corinthians 9:14). But for most Christians, working at an occupation, earning their living and giving is the routine they are called to.

The settledness we are to be driven toward then, is a rhythm of financially productive work. This enables a church and THE Church to excel at the more eternal business of love.

**4:12 “so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.”**

Engaging in financially productive business enables love and enables what Paul describes here as proper behavior toward outsiders. The word proper is a word which means honorable or noble. It is behavior that is admirable in that it adorns the truth rather than detracting from it.

Paul adds a phrase which specifies a key element of such behavior. Its result is that those who behave in this way will not be in any financial need. Paul's economic model for Christians was that they not be dependent on handouts from anyone. The condition of needing others to give money to provide for necessities is to be temporary. When it arises, that need should be met by other Christians. The norm however, is that Christians work and have extra to meet the needs of others (Ephesians 4:28; 2 Corinthians 9:8-11; Titus 3:14).

Our love excels when we are positioned to minister to those in need. We excel at love when we work productively so that we do not have need ourselves, and can help others both inside and outside the church who are in need. Paul wants us to be givers rather than receivers.

**4:13 “but we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest with no hope.”**

People are uninformed when they lack information or when they have not given proper attention to the information they have been provided with. Both conditions exist in the Christian community, and it is never acceptable. For whatever reason, the Thessalonians were uninformed about those who had died. Paul wants to eliminate this ignorance, and so verses 13-18 are meant to do so.

Paul specific concern was the level of grief they were suffering from when loved ones died. It is not that Christians are not to grieve. Where there is separation and loss there will be grief. However, that grief is to be mitigated by certain facts that provide comfort and hope. Christian's grief is to be different than that of unbelievers.

This verse informs us that there is information about those who died that will minister to us in our grief once we are aware of it. It is information that provides hope in regards to both them and us.

It appears that the Thessalonians grief was not a result of ignorance of the fact that the dead would be raised. Rather, their ignorance concerned the timing of the resurrection WHEN their loved ones would be raised.

Generally among the Jews there was a clear understanding that there was a resurrection from the dead. There was also the knowledge among them that there was to be a golden age that would come about through the Christ's reign on earth.

Within this church, which started with Jewish converts (Acts 17:1-4), this knowledge would have spread to the Gentile converts. This was to be expected because until the time of Paul, the timing of the resurrection had not been clarified by God. It was a mystery (1 Corinthians 15:51-58). Because of this limited understanding it likely followed that those fortunate enough to be alive on Earth at the time of Christ's return would experience this wonderful age about which so much had been written and promised by the Old Testament prophets. Those who died would be raised from the dead, but they would miss this great golden age of the earth when Yahweh's justice would right all the wrongs. This was grievous to them. Death still had some sting. Paul would make them aware of another resurrection that would negate this sorrow in the verses that come.

**4:14 “for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.”**

This verse is composed of a conditional statement, introduced by the word “if.” It closes with a statement of result, a logical consequence, called in grammar an apodosis. The word “if” in the beginning of the verse can be understood as meaning “since.” Paul is saying that since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, there is a logical next thing to believe in the wake of that belief.

That “next thing” is that God will bring back to earth with Jesus those who died in Jesus dead believers. The piece of information the Thessalonians did not know was provided here the timing of the resurrection of dead believers. It would happen before Jesus returned to earth to rule it. The dead in Christ would return to Earth with Christ. This that the Thessalonians did not know was now made known to them.

We can begin to piece together why the experience of grief was such as one might expect from only unbelievers. The Thessalonians thought that those who died would miss out on the return of Christ and so would miss out on his reign on the earth. The great event they looked forward to they would never see because they had died. They had been ignorant of the fact that believers would be raised before the general resurrection at the end of time. So they did not know that those who had died would participate in Christ's return and His rule over the earth. This ignorance Paul removes with this verse.

**4:15 “for this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who fall asleep.”**

In this verse we see the thing expressed that the Thessalonians were concerned about that those who were alive would “precede” those who had died in their experience of Christ. In ignorance they had thought that there was no resurrection of dead saints at the second coming of Christ. Therefore, to die was to miss out on seeing Christ's glorious kingdom. Paul says here that those who live to see the day when Christ returns to earth will by no means precede dead saints in this experience. The grammar Paul chose to use is emphatic on this point. The exact order of events will be given in the verses that follow, but here emphatic assurance is given that the living will not have an experience with Christ that the dead will miss out on.

Paul gives this teaching as having come directly from Jesus. Apart from a special message from Jesus, this idea of a resurrection just before Jesus' second coming would have remaining a mystery (1 Corinthians 15:51). That is an important matter in

our interpretation of the Old Testament. We do not see the teaching about a resurrection of the righteous dead clearly presented in the Old Testament, though we can look back and see it provided for in texts like Isaiah 26 (v. 20).

We do not see it in the written accounts of Jesus' teaching in specific detail. We do not know when the apostles received it. We know Jesus taught the eleven several things in His post-resurrection appearances (Luke 24:27-32, 44-45). These were provided for in the Old Testament Scriptures but were not clear to the readers. We know that Paul received visions that revealed to him more than he was permitted to pass on to others (2 Corinthians 12:4). But we do not know when this mystery of the resurrection was revealed nor why it was kept so secure.

Paul uses the first-person plural in speaking of those who might live until Christ returns. This tells us that he himself had the expectation of the return of Christ in his day. This means he did not know the time of Christ's return, even as Christ did not know (Matthew 24:36). It means that whatever signs there are that precede the event, Paul either believed were present or that they could easily become present very quickly. It helps us understand that the signs Christ gave of His return (Matt. 24:15-35), would not take place over numerous decades. Paul believed he himself would live to see the day of Christ's return.

**4:16 “for the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first.”**

There are number of things spoken in Scripture that enable us to know a great deal about Jesus' return to earth. None of them enable us to know the day or the hour of his return, but they do enable us to know several things about the season (Matthew 24:32-36). By season we are referring to the Bible speaking a great deal about general prevailing conditions in the world at the time of Jesus return and some very specific information as well. A third of the Bible by some estimates is given to prophecy. While much of that has to do with what has now passed, there is still much we anticipate that was predicted, especially regarding this great event, the return of Jesus to reign.

The era that Jesus will bring about on the Earth begins to be spoken about in the earliest pages of Scripture. It is in the mind of Yahweh when he speaks of the seed of the woman crushing Satan's head (Genesis 3:15 CF Daniel 2:44-45). It was the reason he could say to Abraham all nations of the earth will be blessed through Abraham's seed (Genesis 12:1-3). It was why Yahweh could speak to Moses of what he would do in and through Israel in the latter days (Deuteronomy 4:25-31; 31:29). It is why Yahweh could make a promise to David about his offspring ruling forever (2 Samuel 7:16). Recovery of the earth from evil and from the evil one is the end toward which God's plan is working. An important stage of that plan will be the subjugation of Earth's kingdoms brought about by Christ when He returns to earth (Revelation 19-20).

In understanding Bible prophecy, it is important to view passages in the Thessalonians epistles in the larger context of all the Bible's statements. An important place to begin is with the prophecies of Daniel. Daniel's visions have enabled us to see major world empires. Beginning with the Babylonians, these visions projected the rise of the empires of Persia and Greece, and then the empire of Rome and the ensuing dominance of Western civilization. Daniel's prophetic vision culminates with the triumph of the kingdom of God.



These teachings from Daniel form a kind of framework to which other Scripture, including these verses, add more detail and substance. And so it is not surprising that when Jesus spoke about the timing of his return (Matthew 24:3-14), he spoke of the season of time predicted by Daniel (Matthew 24:15-28). That season would feature one last great world Emperor, a kind of incarnation of Satan himself who would bring about what Daniel called “the Abomination of Desolation”. It is in the season of this king that Jesus will return to earth to set up his kingdom. He Himself is the Christ, the “anointed one,” Earth’s rightful ruler, and he will become its ruler. The book of Revelation is Jesus’ account of this season, communicated through an angel to John, who recorded it as directed for us (Revelation 1:1).

Paul records in this statement phenomena that will accompany the actual experience of the resurrection that precedes Christ’s return. Now Paul specifically mentions Christ’s descent. Naturally His return will be a descent from heaven. In Acts 1 we see Jesus ascending into heaven (Acts 1:9). At that point two heavenly messengers tell the disciples that Jesus’ return will happen in the same way. His ascent into heaven appears to have happened slow enough that they could watch him slowly disappear, as opposed to a sudden momentary disappearance. Jesus mentioned his “sign appearing in the sky” in connection with his return (Matthew 24:30). It is likely then that His coming is a very slow event.

This resurrection that precedes His actual earthly presence is connected by Paul to Jesus’ descent. The question remains unanswered that is raised by some, namely, is this His descent to reign on the earth, or just His descent to raise the dead in Christ? Several Christians see this as a separate event and have called it “the rapture” for reasons that will be discussed when we arrive at verse 17!

Paul goes on to mention three phenomena that occur as part of Christ’s return. There will be a shout, the voice of the Archangel, and the trumpet of God. All these phenomena are seen at various times in John’s prophecy in the book we call Revelation. Opinions of course, vary greatly regarding how to interpret Revelation. Neither event—the resurrection of dead believers or the return of Christ is specifically and positively pinpointed in the Book.

Of those scholars that see a clear chronology in the book of Revelation, some place this resurrection of believing saints very early, having already occurred in chapter 4. This view suggests that God’s family is absent from Earth for the period of trouble on earth presented in Daniel and Revelation and referred to by Jesus—the “tribulation” that accompanies the presence of the great evil Empire. This is called a belief in a “pre-tribulation rapture”.

Other such scholars place this resurrection later during this time of tribulation, at its midpoint which they feel is marked by the opening of the 4<sup>th</sup> seal (Revelation 6:7), and the shout “Come!”. This position is known by the term “mid-tribulation rapture”.

Still others place the event later, in chapter 6 of Revelation at the opening of the sixth seal, which marks the beginning of the wrath of Yahweh being poured out on evil (Revelation 6:12-17). This is called a pre—wrath rapture. Still others place the event much later in the revelation account, some in chapter 18, some in Chapter 19. This is called belief in a “post-tribulation rapture.”

Many simply throw their hands up and say it cannot be known. This last position is understandable to some degree given the complexity of prophetic study. But given the fact that God has given us so much information on the end of the present age, it is likely that it is not His will for us to give up.

It is best to be charitable in our view of these things. The shout, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God mentioned by Paul here are at best very difficult to collate with other prophecies. There is no place where they are seen happening simultaneously. While Paul's account does not demand that they do, if they are separated by gaps in time then the field of options is rather large. We cannot be certain how these phenomena fit in with the other prophetic accounts.

There are number of trumpet blasts associated with the events surrounding Christ return (Isaiah 27:13; Revelation 8, 9; 11:15). The trumpet blast mentioned in another Scriptures may or may not coincide with the blast of the trumpet Paul speaks of here. In his account of the resurrection of the dead in Christ in his letters to the Corinthians he also speaks of a trumpet blast. In fact, in that account he calls it "the last trumpet" (1 Corinthians 15:52). This would seem to tie it to the trumpet of Revelation 11:15 and imply a "post-tribulation rapture".

The shout mentioned by Paul is even more difficult to pinpoint. There is no specific information on who gives a shout or what is said. It could be that the phrase "the voice of the Archangel" is explanatory, meaning the Archangel is the source of the shout. It could also be that the two things are separately sourced. There are several times in Revelation where there is a voice that gives a command (6:3, 5, 7; 11:12; 108:4). None of these can be dogmatically and positively seen in that context as producing a gathering together and rescue of all who are in Christ as Paul is described to the Thessalonians.

It seems best to view the information here on the shout, the voice of the Archangel, as standing alone. There is nothing that demands they be tied in with other such shouts and commands in Scripture. The matter of the trumpet blast must be pondered a little further due to it being called in 1 Corinthians "the last trumpet." It remains mysterious because there is no other place in Scripture where a trumpet blast is specifically named as "the last trumpet." This phrase could mean the last trumpet in time, meaning the last trumpet blast that will ever be given. It could be referring to the last trumpet we know about as spoken of in Revelation 11:15. It could also mean the last trumpet blast or summoning of God's elect, that they will from that point on always remained assembled together. This latter view would seem to make more sense, in which case we don't know when it is and it may not be mentioned elsewhere in Scripture.

In terms of our understanding the first part of this verse piques our interest. In terms of Paul's letter, the last part of the verse is his main point. That which he wants the Thessalonians informed about is that the dead in Christ will rise first. He is describing the first of two consecutive things that will come about as a result of the shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpets of God. The first event is the bodily resurrection of all who are dead in Christ. We assume that to mean all who were viewed by God as His own as a result of their faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice. This would include both New Testament saints and Old Testament saints, unless the latter are seen as having been raised at the death/resurrection of Christ as some think (Matthew 26:51-53). Those who are raised will be raised in new imperishable bodies (1 Corinthians 15:52).

So the Thessalonians need not be concerned that the dead would miss out on the coming kingdom of Christ. The dead would be transformed before the living and made ready for the experience of the Kingdom of Christ. This resurrection and transformation would be followed by the second of the two events that the shout, the voice of the archangel, and the children of God bring about. Paul names this second event in the following verse.

**4:17 “then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.”**

Paul describes the second event within the event and the series of events involving the return of Jesus. Nowhere else in Scripture is this “catching up” of living believers spoken of so explicitly. The word rapture has been coined from the Latin word for “caught up” and is the name Christians have assigned to this mysterious event.

Before we speak of what might be inferred in the statements of the text, we must clearly state what we observe in its actual words. First, this catching up happens to all believers who are alive at the time of Christ’s return. Second it happens after dead believers have been raised and are in “the air” and in “the clouds.” Fourth, we merge with them where they are. Fourth, we are from that point forward always with the Lord.

Paul has now described two successive events that occur when Christ returns. The dead in Christ have been raised. Then the living believers have been snatched from the earth. They are gathered into one group in the air where they meet up with the Lord. These two events are part of the “main event”, which is the coming of the Lord to judge and rule the earth.

This gathering together of all who are in Christ, both dead and alive, is spoken of in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:51-58). That text speaks of it as a mystery. It was clear to the Old Testament saints that there would be a resurrection and that God would set up his kingdom on earth. But how the two related and the interplay of these two ideas was a mystery. This account in 1 Thessalonians clears that up some. It raises the issue of what kind of bodies the dead would have, or will they have bodies. That leaves us with this question; will the living have their same bodies through eternity? These questions are both answered in 1 Corinthians where we are told that we all will not die, but we will all be changed (1 Corinthians 15:52). It is that specific change of body that was a mystery until Paul’s writings revealed it.

These verses in 1 Thessalonians describe the order of this transformation, this great change in our bodies. The dead are changed first. From our point of view we surmise that their genetic code, never lost by God, manifests itself in a new kind of body. It will be like the old, yet distinct and dramatically different, as was the resurrected body of Jesus. Then the living will be transformed in an instant. They too will be made like Christ in every way including their physical makeup. So we have in this verse the remarkable physical transformation of the entire family of God. We have them physically present with Jesus for the first time ever, never to be separated again from Him or from each other.

When the sequence of events that make up this mass miracle of transformation occur remains mysterious. The fact that we meet the Lord “in the air” according to Paul and that no mention is made immediately of us coming back down to earth with Him to rule, has led to much speculation. This missing detail could be significant, or it could

be just a reflection of the brevity of the account. Many suggests that this argues for time between this “rapture” and the revelation of Jesus and his many sons and daughters on earth to rule.

This coming of the kingdom of God to Earth was pictured by Jesus through the metaphor of the physical birth of a child. There would be a long series of “birth pangs” that would characterize the age between His ascension into heaven and His return (Matthew 24:5-14). These were just normal pains, like those suffered by any woman during her months of pregnancy. These were not labor pains per se.

The beginning of the real labor pains would be marked by the “abomination of desolation” spoken of by Daniel the prophet. There would be a time of great tribulation described by Daniel that would envelop the Earth (Matthew 24:15-25). It would come on a world that is used to trouble, even as a pregnant woman becomes accustomed to the normal pains of pregnancy. But this trouble would be uniquely intense (Matthew 24:21), just as actual labor differs from normal pregnancy pains.

After a period of tribulation another event projected by the prophets would overtake the earth. It is called “the day of the Lord.” It is the day determined by God in eternity past when he would confront evil men, and the powers of evil themselves (Isaiah 2:12-22). Its arrival will be marked by the darkening of the sun and moon (Isaiah 13:10; 24:23; Joel 2:10, 13;). This pouring out of wrath by God against evil is the event many believe this “rapture” will save believers from (Matthew 24:29). Their view is that we will be with the Lord, away from the earth, protected from His wrath. We will come back to earth with Christ and rise to rule in the wake of this great outpouring of wrath.

This understanding of the event that Paul is describing in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 as a rescue by God and taking up of His family out of harm’s way, has three main streams of thought. It also has a fourth position more recently proposed.

The first mainstream of thought is that the “day of the Lord” begins seven years before Christ’s return to earth to reign, that it is synonymous with Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week. The “rapture” they say, is an event for which there is absolutely no warning, and so can happen at any time. It will be followed by a seven-year period of trouble on earth under the rule of the last great evil Empire. They see 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as teaching that we will be present with the Lord in heaven during this time.

The second mainstream of thought sees the “day of the Lord” as beginning in the middle of Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week, when the last great ruler breaks his covenant with Israel and desecrates the holy place (Matthew 24:15; Daniel 9:27). The “day of the Lord” begins then, three and a half years before the actual return of Christ to rule, in the middle of the tribulation. Believers are “raptured” from the earth and so saved from the judgment of the “day of the Lord”.

The third mainstream of thought sees believers kept through the time of tribulation and the day of the Lord, but not kept from it. They see Paul describing to the Thessalonians the day of Jesus return to rule. They rightfully point out that Paul’s words do not demand that the “rapture” be a separate event from the return of Christ. They propose that believers are snatched from the earth, transformed, then return immediately with Jesus to rule the earth.

A fourth view of this “rapture” has emerged which records it as an event that rescues believers from the day of the Lord. It places the day of the Lord as beginning sometime during the last half of Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week. They see that day as having a very

distinct beginning as the biblical text indicate. This beginning is a time when the sun, moon, and stars are darkened. The “rapture” will happen at this time according to this view. They also see the 1 Thessalonians text as pointing to a the time away from the Earth and Earth’s events with the Lord for believers while God’s wrath is being poured out against evil.

There are several streams of thought within Christianity that constitute a majority view that see Daniel’s 70th week in a more symbolic way, and Christ’s earthly kingdom in a more symbolic way. They would see most of the events of Daniel and Revelation as having been fulfilled and the end of the present earth as the next great event. They would see the resurrection spoken of in 1 Thessalonians as part of the general resurrection of all people at the end of the earth. Again, this has been the majority view of Christian thinkers from about the third century until the present time. The view of a literal reign of Christ, a literal seven-year period of tribulation, and the “rapture,” has been reborn based on a literal reading of Scripture and renewed interest in the doctrinal positions of the early church.

What seems very clear from 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 combined with 1 Corinthians 15:52–58, is that Paul was adding more information to that revealed in the Old Testament about the resurrection of believers. This big event would still be mysterious in Christian thought apart from this information contributed by the Holy Spirit through Paul. His information makes more about the return of Jesus that add considerably to our comfort in death.

The fact Paul was emphasizing to the Thessalonians in this text is that those who died would miss nothing in terms of events Christians were looking forward to. They would in fact, see Christ before those who are alive at the time of Jesus’ return. This was the purpose of this revelation, to comfort and console Christians regarding the death of fellow believers. They were to grieve differently because they would see loved ones again and be together forever with the Lord. They would enjoy together all the things He has in store for His children. They will not miss any of what He proclaimed He will do.

#### **4:18 “Therefore comfort one another with these words.”**

The promise with respect to the godly life and its reward relates primarily to all that lies beyond the present life we know (1 Corinthians 15:19, 32). It does not relate to this present life and world. We are assured primarily of trouble in this life (John 16:33). Our comfort lies not in the fact that God will orchestrate a big break for us and bring us success in this life, though He certainly can do it and does in some cases. Our comfort lies in His promise to return and our full redemption when He does so.

This great truth enables Christians to have a foundation for hope. Eschatology, the study of the things of the last days, has this practical value in people. They must know about Christ’s return, be led in contemplating it, and be helped to imagine it, if they are to have hope in a cruel, uncertain world.

A leader that leads people to think “Maranatha!” (1 Corinthians 16:22; Come Lord!), equips them to order their lives well. Ultimately, the things in which we place our hope are the things which order and shape our lives for that day (Matthew 6:21). If leaders did not do the hard work of developing their own thinking on eschatology so that they can and do convey such a hope to their followers, they will develop a movement that is very lukewarm about Christ’s return. They will be people who don’t really care to believe it. They will be worldly people who cling to the things of this present life. They will comfort one another in the normal worldly way. In the end they will grieve over loss just like those who have no hope (verse 13).

## 1 Thessalonians 5

**5:1 “now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you.”**

Paul uses two expressions of time in this verse. They are rendered by the words “times” and the word “epochs” in the NASB. These translate the Greek words χρόνων and καιρών. These two words are used together in their plural forms in one other place in the New Testament (Acts 1:7). There they also occur in the context in which future events are in question.

The word χρόνων, rendered “times”, is recognized as the generic Greek word for time. For example if one wanted to ask what time it was, or speak of time passing quickly, they would use this word. The word καιρών rendered “epochs” here, is a term that is used to speak of time periods. So if we wanted to speak of the time period of a certain president we might say “during Abraham Lincoln’s time.” But these are general observations. Like many words there is great overlap in meaning and these distinctions can disappear. It is possible however, that when Paul uses the two words together like this he is using them to purposely take advantage of their subtle differences in meaning

This subtle difference in meaning may be illustrated in a passage such as Acts 17:26–30, where the two words occur in their plural forms near each other. There the word καιρος appears first (Acts 17:26). In that verse it is used to express what we might call scheduled time, boundaried by a specific date decreed by God. The verse states that each nation was given its “appointed season of time” on God schedule. The word χρόνος occurs three verses later (Acts 17:30). It is used to express a condition that existed over time among the world’s nations. They experienced “times of ignorance.” These times (χρόνος) of ignorance existed because of the appointed season of time (perhaps καιρος), that would come later when the gospel would be declared to all nations. So in this context we have seasons (καιρος) decreed by God and we have as a result times (χρόνος) outside of those decreed time periods that take on characteristics that are a consequence of the decreed seasons.

So by the phrase times and epochs, Paul is describing the normal ebb and flow of human life and those seasons that interrupt it. There are those time periods decreed by God that bring some change in His dealings with humanity. These things are spoken of frequently in God’s revelation of His thoughts for humanity. He speaks of normalcy, and predictability that is decreed. He also speaks of His own intervention and change. So, for example, we have the normal rhythms of the seasons, of planting and harvesting and subsistence (Acts 14:16–17). We also have the day of the Lord predicted (Isaiah 2:12–22). In the language of 1 Thessalonians 5:1, the former would be times (χρόνος), the later epochs (καιρος).

Paul has spoken of a great event that included the coming of Christ to rule and the resurrection and catching up or “rapture” of believers. Now he is transitioning to the subject that always is a part of that discussion, timing. He says that the Thessalonians are informed on this matter. They were ignorant about some of the events within the greater epoch of the Lord’s return. But here Paul indicates that they had all the information they needed related to times and epochs. So they knew something about times general characteristics of the passing years leading up to this great event. They

also knew about the event itself and what era it would usher in. So the thoughts that followed would be things they were acquainted with.

Like any of us, Paul and the Thessalonians would have loved to know when this great event would occur. The disciples asked this “when” question of Jesus (Matthew 24:3; Acts 1:6-7). He gave them only information on what the intervening years would be like before His return (Matthew 24:4-14), and some of the events that would be seen leading up to that great epoch (Matthew 24:15-29). He did not pinpoint the date.

There is significance in the fact that the return of Christ is seen as an epoch in Scripture. It is not an event that comes and goes in a day, though there will certainly be a day and a specific time of His “touch-down.” Scripture treats His return as a whole era, a series of events. It will involve times of judgment first, times of unsurpassed peace and prosperity, and finally times of rebellion. All of it is referred to as “the day of the Lord” in Scripture. The timing of the arrival of that great event, the day of the Lord, is what Paul is taking up here.

### **5:2 “for you yourselves know that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.”**

The Thessalonians knew this truth. That was the apostolic teaching about the day of the Lord. These messages all echoed the words of Jesus (Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15).

The day of the Lord is a phrase which has a general usage in the Old Testament. The phrase refers to times of reckoning, when God calls into account certain courses of action taken by people and nations and takes vengeance against them (Ezekiel 13:5; Joel 1:15). But this short-term accounting is a picture of an actual event that will bring accountability to all the people of the Earth (Isaiah 2:1 to-22; 13:6-16). In the Old Testament the language seems to emerge from the more local, immediate judgment, into this coming universal one (Joel 1:15; 2:1-13; 2:30-32; 3:9-21). That great day of the Almighty’s confrontation with evil is a period marked by signs in the heavens, and cataclysmic events on earth (Joel 230-32; Matthew 24:29; Revelation 6:12-17). Then there is one last and greater fulfillment of these predictions of God’s day of reckoning that would result in the destruction of the present earth and heavens (2 Peter 3:10-15).

We conclude then that the term “day of the Lord” has three things in view when it is used in the Scripture that depend on the viewpoint the human author is taking in the context. First, it depicts instances of judgment by God that are normal in the ebb and flow of world events. These come as nations, including Israel, are held accountable for various injustices they have committed (Ezekiel 13:1-7; 30:1-2; Jeremiah 46:10; Joel 1:13-2:11; Amos 1:18-20).

Second, it depicts the time when the prophesied Messiah appears on earth to judge it and rule it. This era will involve an outpouring of God’s wrath against sin and rebellion of humanity and that of the evil one, but that stops short of fully destroying the Earth (Revelation 6:12-17). The day of the Lord includes the return of Christ with his people to conquer and subdue the earth and rule it (Revelation 19:11-200:10).

Third, the day of the Lord depicts a final rebellion orchestrated by the evil one and the judgment of Yahweh against that rebellion that results in the destruction of the earth and the resurrection of the wicked dead for judgment (Zephaniah 1:16-18; 2 Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 20:7-15). From Paul’s perspective in 1 Thessalonians, it is likely proper to



refer to the whole era of Christ's rule on earth, from his 2<sup>nd</sup> coming until the destruction of the earth as the day of the Lord. The use of the term for a more localized judgment against individual nations is likely borrowed from the idea of this great era that culminates Yahweh's program for this Earth.

From Paul's viewpoint in this letter he is speaking of the day of the Lord in the sense of the coming outpouring of God's wrath against sin and the return of Christ to the earth. That day of the Lord would not result in the immediate destruction of the earth, but in Christ's rule over it. The timing of that event with its ushering in of the age that would follow it, are unknown to anyone except God the Father (Matthew 24:36). Again, Paul's imagery of the thief was that used by Jesus (Luke 12:39). It depicts the fact that it will come on the earth when they do not expect it, and so aren't prepared. This is something that Paul says the Thessalonians knew. It was part of the teaching that Paul and the other apostles took with them to all places.

**5:3 "while they are saying 'peace and safety!' Then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape."**

There would be no sleeping for us and we would be on guard if we knew a thief was coming on a particular night. In the normal sense of our routines there would be no night. We would be ready to defend our property. The thief who comes when we are asleep catches us in our weakness, unprepared. The day of the Lord will sweep over the earth in that way. It will not be without its warning signs to those who are alert. It will be quite clear. But to those who have ignored revelation, it will be the last thing they expect.

Again, it appears from Scripture that the expression "the day of the Lord" refers to an epoch, a certain and specific season of time that is of overwhelming divine significance. It includes a period of destruction, when God's wrath is poured out against all who suppresses truth. This time of wrath will culminate with the physical arrival of Jesus Christ on earth to be its ruler. There will be a period of renovation, marked by unparalleled peace and prosperity as He carries out His rule. This will be followed by a final rebellion led by Satan which will result in the destruction of the present earth. This entire period is called the day of the Lord likely because it is marked by His visible presence on the Earth and His more visible rule over the affairs of man.

This season of time is in view in much of the prophetic passages of both Old and New Testaments. The book of Revelation is the primary source of our understanding of this coming era on earth. It gives us information on the period immediately leading up to the destruction Paul speaks of here in 1 Thessalonians 5:3, then with the actual outpouring of the wrath of God on the earth. So in chapters 1-6 of Revelation we see thoughts on God's kingdom as it exists among the world's kingdom in the era from Christ until the great day of the Lord. As part of that we see a scene in heaven in chapters 4-5 that seems to close the present era and open another one on earth. We then see scenes that depict events on earth as that day of the Lord draws near and arrives (chapter 6). At the end of chapter 6 we find the day the Lord has come. Chapter 7-19 depict the wrath of God being poured out against the kingdom of evil, with occasional scenes that depict the longer struggle of God's people against evil (chapter 12), the emergence on earth of Satan's counterfeit Christ (chapter 13), the destruction of his regime on the earth (chapter 17). Christ's arrival on the earth as conquering King is described in Chapter 19. The new heaven and earth and life in the environment are briefly touched on in chapters 21-22. So in the book of Revelation we

find Jesus teaching on the day of the Lord, the events leading up to it, and those that follow it. While there is much we do not know about it, we are certainly not ignorant about the day of the Lord.

We find in the teaching of Christ that the season immediately leading up to the day of the Lord will be marked by the emergence on earth of the world dictator (Matthew 24:15; Revelation 6:2; 13:1-8). From heaven's point of view he is evil incarnate, the worst thing to come in terms of the present creation. However, on earth there is every indication that most people will see him and his cohorts as their savior (Revelation 13:3-4; 8; 13-14).

This is captured by Paul in his sudden switch in pronouns in this verse. The "you" of verse 2 is replaced by the "they" of this verse. It appears that the earth will be united behind this world dictator as it never has been before under any ruler. Though there will be a myriad of troubles on earth (Revelation 6:3-11), there will be a sense of peace and safety under this king's rule (Revelation 13:4). This will be the talk of the earth and it is the peace and safety Paul is referring to here. It will be a grand delusion.

The slumber under the delusions of this satanic world ruler will be interrupted by some cataclysmic events that to all observers will be clear and obvious. They will strike fear in the hearts of even the stoutest men (Isaiah 2:19-21; Joel 2:30-32; Revelation 6:12-17). This is the sudden advent of destruction that Paul is describing here in his words to the Thessalonians. He describes the sudden coming of this event as being like a contraction that suddenly comes over the body of a woman giving birth.

Paul adds the thought that "they shall not escape." There is throughout Scripture this warning. God has an appointed a time for confrontation with evil and evil beings. Since Eden He has, in mercy, delayed that day. But it is appointed, and it will occur. There is no one who will avoid this eventuality except those who by faith have been forgiven for their sins. Paul will speak of this escape in verse nine. The day encompasses and engulfs all. When the horror of the day of the Lord ends, all will have been personally judged by God and assigned an appropriate place for all eternity (Revelation 20:11-15).

#### **5:4 "but you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you as a thief."**

The figure of darkness in Scripture refers to living outside the truth, either willingly or in ignorance. There is legitimate ignorance, which God's justice allows for. There is also willful ignorance where truth is intentionally ignored and suppressed. This is most often what is in view when the imagery of living in darkness is used (Psalm 43:3; 56:13; 119:105, 130; 19: a; 36:9; Isaiah 2:5; 50:11).

Paul is speaking to the fact that the Thessalonians are informed about the truth as it relates to the coming day of the Lord, and the truth about themselves, God, and the world in general. They live in the light. They are alert and on guard as the truth instructs. The outpouring of God's wrath against evil will not catch them off-guard. They have been informed that it is coming and they have lived in light of that information.

There is considerable diversity of opinion about what is implied in this teaching by Paul in this entire section of his letter. There has developed within the teaching of the church the idea of an event called "the rapture." As mentioned earlier, that term is taken from the Latin term used in the rendering of 4:17 the idea of the living believers

being “caught up” by the Lord. As the rapture has been pondered and studied it has become obvious that the living believers are “caught up” off the earth before Christ actually touches the earth, since they meet Him “in the air” (4:17).

So as that gap of time between the “catching up” and His appearance on earth has been both studied and imagined, it has given birth to what is called the doctrine of immanency. This doctrine teaches that while the second coming of Christ is preceded by many signs, this rapture of His own from the earth may not be. It is imminent, that is, it could happen at any moment. The doctrine is part of the teaching that undergirds the pre-tribulation rapture position. Those who view the rapture in this way view that the great tribulation is not a precursor to the day of the Lord but IS the day of the Lord.

According to this line of thinking, this verse is saying that Christians will not be overtaken by the day of the Lord because they will have been taken from the earth. As those who embrace the truth they are no longer living in darkness and therefore will not be victims of God’s wrath being poured out against darkness. An initial examination of this view could result in it being flippantly dismissed. But there is considerable merit to it. It is undeniable, as we’ve seen in this context, that Paul was expecting this event, this “catching up” in his lifetime.

The present verse is important because it states that the day of the Lord will not overtake believers like a thief. The meaning of “like a thief” in this context is unexpectedly and unprepared. The idea is that believers will not be victims of the day of the Lord, because they are expecting it and are prepared for it. The subject being considered is when this great event called the day of the Lord will begin. Paul was already given one side of it when buzzwords on the earth are peace and safety. Jesus had given other signs (Matthew 24:15–30).

When Paul speaks of us not being in darkness it seems best to interpret him as saying we are not ignorant. We would say today, “we are not in the dark about these events.” This interpretation complies with the normal use of the metaphor of light and darkness in the Scripture. The idea expressed by Paul’s words here is that the day of the Lord will not catch us unprepared, because of what we know. Jesus originated the metaphor of the thief in the night. His point was that if you know the time frame that thief is coming in, you will not be a victim of theft (Matthew 24:42–44). His emphasis seemed to be that we do not know which day, he is coming (Matthew 24:36, 42), but we do know the season. We know how things will look on the earth in the period leading up to Christ’s return. Paul’s thought here then should be seen as simply being consistent with the teaching of Jesus, that understanding of truth will keep us from being unprepared for the day of the Lord.

This means that the verse is not a defacto support for a pre-tribulation rapture belief. If seen in the way suggested, it supports the idea that Christians may indeed be on the earth during the time of intense tribulation that immediately precedes the day of the Lord. But this verse teaches that those events and the day of the Lord itself will not sneak up on them, nor will they be victims of it. The defense of the pre-tribulation view of the rapture must be built on verses 8–10, in chapter two of Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians.

Now what are the signs of the day of the Lord that keep us from being surprised by it? The first is the presence in Scripture of consistent testimony that there is such a day. Beginning in Isaiah we are told that Yahweh does have a day planned in which He will confront evil (Isaiah 2:12–22). If we embrace the testimony of the Scripture, we will be

prepared for it and will live with it in view. The oft repeated testimony of the Holy Spirit on any matter should be seen as a certainty of its truth.

The Old Testament's testimony on the signs of the day of the Lord are best seen in the book of Joel. Joel's testimony was where Peter turned in speaking of the era that the church was moving into as earth continued its journey toward this great epoch (Acts 2:17-21; Joel 2:28-32). He takes a prophecy about the activity of the Holy Spirit among God's children as having been fulfilled by the filling of the Holy Spirit that all just witnessed. It is noticeable that Peter anticipated that the era he had just seen ushered in by the Holy Spirit would be a short one. This is obvious from the words of his next recorded sermon (Acts 3:19-26). He believed that the day of the Lord and the subsequent rule of Jesus Christ would occur soon. But the key thing to note is the sign of the arrival of the day of the Lord given by Joel. The sign is that the "sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes." The testimony of Isaiah agrees with this (Isaiah 13:9-10). There would be this definitive sign in the heavens.

The testimony of the New Testament is similar. Jesus spoke of there being signs in the "Sun, moon and stars" preceding His coming (Luke 21:25). He said that the sun would be "darkened," and the moon would not give its light before His coming (Matthew 24:29). John, in his record of Christ's revelation of the end times reports a definitive point in time when "the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood". The response to that event is that the great day of God's wrath had come (Revelation 6:12-17). So there are three statements, all originating with Jesus, that point to definitive signs in the heavens, just as the prophets Isaiah and Joel had done.

Another sign that would precede the day of the Lord and Jesus' second coming would be a period of great trouble and tribulation on earth. This would be an era marked by the rule of the last great world dictator, alluded to by Daniel in his vision of the 70 weeks (Daniel 9:24-27). Jesus picks up on Daniel's prophecy and gives the same sign of His coming, a sign that would be seen before the darkening of the sun and moon, the sign of the great tribulation on the earth (Matthew 24:15-29). The testimony of John's Revelation agrees with this, but before the darkening of the sun and moon there would be a series of great troublesome occurrences on earth (Revelation 6:1-12). Jesus looks ahead to capture the mood on earth as people process both the trouble on earth and the signs in the heavens. He uses words like perplexity, fainting, and fear (Luke 21:25-28).

How then does this align with Paul's prediction in this context that the day of the Lord will come when they are saying "peace and safety". There are a couple of ways that this discrepancy can be resolved. First, it could be that in the name of "peace and safety" or under that motto, wars are being fought and persecutions carried out. Wars that are supposed to end war have been fought before on earth. Ethnic or religious cleansings in the name of preserving a certain "order" have been common. So from a historical perspective it is quite common to have great tribulation at the hands of those operating under the slogan of "peace and safety."

The second way of resolving this conflict is to understand Paul as zooming back and giving an earlier sign of the day of the Lord—a sign of the approaching tribulation. So Paul's thought might be to tell us that this great tribulation is preceded by a time of peace and safety. If that is the case, then the "peace and safety" era is a sign of the approaching tribulation, followed by the darkening the sun and moon, and then the day of the Lord.

At any rate, the day of the Lord will not catch believers unaware if they are living by the guidance that the truth provides. This kind of living is not a given among us. It must be cultivated in practice (Luke 21:34-36). It was not common in advance of Christ's first coming (Matthew 16:1-3). It needs to be fostered in regard to His second coming and the thoughts that follow in Paul's letter will be given to what that type of living is characterized by.

**5:5 “for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness.”**

This verse marks a switch in the use of the term “day.” It has been used much like one of the Hebrew terms for day, Yom, is used to speak of a period. Here “day” is used metaphorically to speak of living under the influence of truth or in the Spirit of truth. The term “darkness” has already been used in the previous verse to speak of living in the sphere of ignorance and rebellion toward the truth, unaware and uninterested in the truth of God.

Paul speaks to the Thessalonians and calls them sons of light and sons of day. Using the 24-hour day as an illustration he pictures them as living with a clear understanding of the truth God has revealed about Himself, His plan, themselves, and the world. Their acceptance of the truth gives them a different kind of life than that experienced by those who rejected it. They see life clearly and world conditions clearly. Others are pictured as being of night or of darkness. They live a life in which they are incapable of certain things altogether, such as having an accurate perspective on the realities of the present life. If any of us are locked in a room devoid of light our perspective on the objects in that room would be very limited. This condition of night or darkness, or the physical challenge of blindness became metaphors in Scripture for living life separated from God.

Paul assures the Thessalonians that there is no legitimate reason why the day of the Lord should sneak up on them and surprise them. They know the truth about it and about all that God has planned for humanity. They know God's appointed day for confronting evil is coming and all events are on schedule to coincide so that at just the time He has appointed all will be exactly as He is planned it. They know that it will mean for the world, and they have an appropriate degree of sadness about that (Isaiah 60:11; Amos 5:18 FF). They know it will assure the final banishment of all that is evil and the universal knowledge of Yahweh and all that is true. It will mean that the whole earth will be filled with His glory (Psalm 46:10; Isaiah 45:4-5, 20-25; Habakkuk 2:13-14). The children of the light and day are those who believe the gospel and show they have been called of God to understand and participate in all the joy that His truth will bring when it bears its fruit.

**5:6 “so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.”**

It is the natural, instinctive order of humanity to sleep at night, and engage in work in the day. That was especially true in the days of Paul when the only source of artificial light was fire and crude lamps. Night was a time for sleep. But from the earliest times it has also been a time for excess.

Obviously, Paul is using the idea of sleep here metaphorically. He is using it as a picture of spiritual lethargy. Such “sleep” is appropriate to those who live in darkness. They are doing that which is instinctive to humanity given the conditions they are in. We who are believers live in the light of truth. It is appropriate for us to be alert.

Paul adds to the word alertness the term sober. He intends that it be taken in its literal sense of not being under the influence of alcohol, as the next verse will show. Day is the time for productivity not for excess. This word sober came to be used of overall moral and spiritual discretion (see verse 8, 2 Timothy 4:5; 1 Peter 5:8). The times being what they are the days leading up to the day of the Lord it is important that we live appropriately so that we will be prepared when Jesus comes.

**5:7 “for those who sleep to their sleeping at night, and those you get drunk get drunk at night.”**

Paul speaks to the idea of spiritual sloth. It occurs where there is no illumination from truth. Biblically, when someone believes in Christ their souls awaken to a new day or era (2 Corinthians 4:6; John 8:12; Matthew 4:16; Luke 2:3 to). God means for them to respond to life in a way appropriate to what they now see and understand about it (Acts 26:17-18; Ephesians 5:8-14). Unresponsiveness to the things of the Spirit is understandable in those who do not have the Spirit. Such “sleep,” and the excessiveness that characterizes it is inappropriate for those who have been enlightened by Him.

This sleep, though not appropriate for believers, is a possibility in them. Paul knew that and that is the reason he gives this instruction. To not believe oneself and other believers capable of such sleep is itself vulnerability to it. Paul would not be moved to give such commands were the scenario not possible.

**5:8 “but since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.”**

When Paul speaks of those who live in excess he uses a third person pronoun “they”. When he speaks of living according to the light he uses the first-person pronouns like “us” and “we”. And so the word “we” starts the sentence in the Greek text. It is emphatic, meaning “we ourselves”. Truth should define us as believers, yet that is a lifestyle we must rise to. Here Paul calls us once again to soberness, to live our lives marked by restraint, discipline, alertness, purpose. This is good stewardship that brings glory to our Creator and reward to us.

Paul unmistakably connects logically this living soberly to a two things. First, we are exhorted and commanded to live soberly after we are reminded that we are of the day. The phrase “but we” starts the verse in the original language and it lets us know that something very different from what Paul has described in verse seven is coming with regard to us who believe. That contrast is that we who believe are “of the day”. Again, by this terminology, Paul is reminding us of our enlightenment by the Holy Spirit so that we have access to all that is true and good. Living soberly then is presented as a logical consequence of possessing the essence of the One who is true.

Second, immediately after the summons to live soberly we find a participle phrase that again describes previous actions that lead logically to this consequence of living soberly. Here in this phrase our previous practice of the faith, spoken of in metaphorical terms, is seen as a catalyst to the soberness. Belief is described as a

breastplate of faith, as is the practice of love. Faith and love are seen as a protective layer over the vitality of our spiritual beings. The hope of our salvation, that entire process of reclamation that God is directing and energizing that will result in our living with Him, is pictured as a helmet. The idea is that God's grand vision and our dream protects our spiritual vitality. Living soberly is something that follows in time logically our initial practice of the faith. Since we do practice the faith and it remains alive and robust, we should rise to all that teaches and implies, and that is part of what is captured by the term sober.

Perhaps however the primary thought in view of the use of the term sober is to live in a state of readiness with respect to our Master Jesus' return. This is in sharp contrast to those on whom the day of the Lord would sneak up on like a thief. It is a state of readiness in the sense of not being weighed down with the normal human affairs, whether of pleasure or business (Luke 21:34). It is a state of prayer for one's own maturity and growing strength (Luke 21:36). It is a state of being busy with the affairs and concerns of Jesus Christ (Matthew 24:45-51). It is a state of "keeping one's garments clean," of not having one's morality shaped by and soiled by the world (Revelation 16:15). All of this is possible because one embraces the truth of Jesus' words and expects His return. So soberness in the context of Christ's return, refers to the proper stewardship of all we have been entrusted with, every truth, every opportunity, every moment of time, every material thing. Soberness can be considered synonymous with stewardship, from a biblical point of view.

The hope of salvation is the happy anticipation of two things. First, that when God holds all humanity accountable, we will be found to be forgiven. That is the hope that every person who believes in the gospel has. Second, that on the day when He holds humanity accountable He will reward the faithfulness and perseverance of the obedient ones. That is the hope of every believer who is a good steward (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27).

### **5:9—"for God has not destined us for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."**

All the power of heaven is at our disposal to be properly prepared for that day (Luke 21:36), which will involve pain and destruction for those who have not believed the gospel. The days leading up to the second coming of Christ will involve much intrigue and deceit (Matthew 24:23-24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12; Revelation 13:11-18). That which will ruin one's destiny in the plan of God will be paramount when that time arrives. So the issue of one's personal follow-through in stewardship is essential. So we see both the sovereignty of God and the free will of humanity at work in a way that leaves us uncertain of where one leaves off and the other begins. One thing seems certain. In the end all who are His sheep will be saved. None will be lost (John 10:27-30). The destiny of the believer is to be rescued from the day when God confronts evil beings. But what that day holds after our rescue may be different for every believer.

Paul clearly states our destiny here. Two things are in mind in his statement that salvation is our destiny, and that this is through Jesus Christ. Salvation in this context is that which will occur in the moment when believers, dead or alive, will be "caught up" off the earth to meet Jesus in the air (4:17). This is the hope of our salvation that is called a helmet in the previous verse (8). We are taken out from among the unbelievers when the time comes for God to confront their evil. When exactly this occurs is open to scrutiny and debate, but there is no doubt that the day of the Lord is aimed at God's enemies not His family. Salvation has to do with being rescued from

that event. All believers will be rescued on that day and that is due to the work of Christ on the cross, and His coming to earth to rescue us.

On the other hand great emphasis is placed in Scripture on being alert and prepared for that day. Now if our salvation is “through our Lord Jesus Christ,” why is our alertness so consistently and urgently called for in this context and in the teachings of our Lord (Matthew 24:36–25:30; Mark 13:32–37; Luke 12:35–40; 21:34–36)? It seems that there are two options in explaining this dilemma. The first is to say that our disobedience can nullify the destiny God has appointed us to. If this is true, then Jesus words that no one can take us from the Father’s hands are not true (John 10:28–2/9). Satan could orchestrate a level of temptation that could lead us to choose a path that would alienate us from God’s love. In such a case we have proved that someone can pluck from God’s hand His children. In that case, God either cannot thwart that scenario or chooses not to. In either case His choice of us proves to be tentative and conditional. That position undoes too much that contradicts what Scripture clearly teaches about our salvation.

The second option is to say that the desire of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is to reward us handsomely for faithfulness. This option seems to be the better of the two, easily defended from the words of Jesus about alertness. Jesus is presented as having reward in His hand when He comes (Isaiah 40:10; Revelation 2 to: 12). Jesus said when He came He would serve those He finds doing what He has charged them to do (Luke 12:37). He also said he would reward his own children in a way that is commensurate with their faithfulness (Luke 19:011–27). There seems to be stronger accountability with respect to those who are servants, but who are unfaithful

(Luke 12:41–48). The exact look of all this is hard to state with absolute certainty. But it seems clear that faithfulness will be looked for and rewarded. That is why Scripture urges us to be alert and purposeful in our lives. God’s desires not just to rescue us but to reward us justly and graciously. That He rewards us is just, not because we deserve reward. We have done only what our appointment requires. But the reward will be just in light of His grace, in the sense that some servants have been faithful to the truth and others have been casual toward it. God’s justice will be demonstrated among His own by their respective rewards they receive from Him. His grace in rewarding anyone for that which His work brought about will be showcased in this great moment at the judgment seat of Christ.

**5:10 “He died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.”**

There are two ways of approaching the figure speech used here of being “awake or asleep.” The first is to take it as it has been used in the immediate context, as speaking of a state of sloth or alertness with respect to the things of God. That means it is saying that Christ’s death came about for us so that our own deeds would not be the thing which determines whether we live with Him eternally. Whether or not that interpretation of this verse is accurate, the concept is true that our salvation comes about only as a result of Christ’s death. This is important in a context where faithfulness is being called for.

The second way of looking at this verse is to see it in its larger context of what happens to the dead when Christ returns to rule. Remember that it appears the Thessalonians were thinking that those who died would miss the era of Jesus rule on the earth (see 4:13). This section from 4:13–5:11, on future events is in this letter in order



to deal with that fear which was caused by their ignorance. So Paul is zooming out here to this larger concern and speaking of the fact that both the dead and the living will participate in Christ's return to earth to reign. The usage of asleep and awake here is the same as in 4:13, where those who sleep are the physically dead.

It seems that the latter of the two interpretations is the most likely for two reasons. First, it seems unlikely that Paul would weaken the call to alertness after he has just spent several verses issuing yet. Though it must be admitted that he strengthens the idea of the sufficiency of the atonement. Second, this fits best with the following verse (verse 11), which will return to the subject of encouraging each other with this information they received from Paul. And so this seems like a return to the same use of sleep as in 4:13-18, where asleep was referring to physical death.

We conclude that in this verse Paul is assuring the Thessalonians that Christ's work on the cross assures them of their resurrection from the dead to live with him for all eternity. Our blessing is that whether living or dead we live with the Lord. Death does not have dominion over us though we experience it.

**5:11 "therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you are doing."**

Paul commends the way the Thessalonians are behaving by this command. They are doing well to encourage and build each other up. This compliment comes at the end of this section that articulates the hope we have that is rooted in our resurrection and rapture and our experience of the Lord's reign on earth. This great scenario looms ahead for us and it has major implications that we must remind each other of. Life is such that it is distracting. Our survival depends on our throwing ourselves into it. But the consuming nature of that engagement can enslave us. Our routine can capture all our best energy and effort. Thoughts of eternity are then swallowed up by demands of time. It is not long before we embrace rest and play as our hope. Once those are enthroned in the place of God's kingdom we are primed for disillusionment.

The activities suggested here are critical to our remaining centered, fully engaged in the work God has called us to, yet fully focused for our hope on his kingdom. Part way through these words on Christ's future return Paul commanded his readers to comfort one another with this truth (4:18). In that command he solidly linked our ability to endure and recover from grief with what we know about the future. Here he uses the same term used earlier, though the NASB has rendered it with a different English word. His point seems to be that the truth of Christ's return inspires that which leads to maturity in the faith.

Two specific things he mentions that we are to do for each other are to encourage and to build up. The word encourage is a compound word that joins the verb meaning "to call" with a preposition meaning "alongside." The picture the word evokes is that of taking one's place besides someone engaged in work of some kind and calling out to them words that motivate them to persist. That is a key ingredient for our persistence in the race. We need others to walk/run alongside us to push us along with their words.

The word buildup is a compound word that joins the word house with a verb that means "to build". It implies deliberate action aimed at supplying that which is needed to complete and strengthen another. The understanding of another's moment, and the need of that moment, as well as an understanding of where God has them and what

He may wish for them is a critical part of our loving them. We are to deliver that in His name to them, whether it be mental, emotional, or physical in nature. The focus is not just meeting a need. It is meeting THE need that will help them mature and grow.

Both things, encouragement and building up, are our logical response to knowing the future God has for us. And the knowledge of the future is itself such that it inspires hope and spiritual growth. So we have in the truth of Christ's return motivation for ourselves and others.

**5:12 "but we requested of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction."**

The force of Paul's command here is that those who lead the church are to be respected by those whom they lead. The actual word rendered "appreciate" by the NASB is a word which means "to know". It is an interesting word because it came from a word which is used primarily in past tenses where it means "to see". But in the perfect tense, which speaks of action that was completed in the past, but which brought about an ongoing result, it means to know. That is a logical drift in meaning. Something which has been seen is known.

The word was used not only of just those things seen with the eye, but of ideas apprehended by the mind through experience or revelation as well (Romans 5:3; 8:28). Such things have in their own way been observed and so are now known. Paul uses the word in these two ways in this letter. He uses an aorist infinitive to express a desire to see physically the face of the Thessalonians (2:17; 3:6, 10). He uses the perfect infinitive to express what is known (3:3, 4; 4:2, 5). This word in places like this assumes another nuance of meaning, that of recognition in the sense of respect. The opposite of respect is conveyed by the negative use of the word. For example, God's retribution is meted out against those who do not "know" him (2 Thessalonians 1:8). All of this is to affirm that the essence of this command is the call to recognition and respect of leaders.

We see here that Paul describes the individuals who are to be respected in three ways. The things mentioned can be seen as three things God calls spiritual leaders to. Paul has in mind in particular the appointed elders of the Thessalonians church. But these things are the essential calling of anyone who would rise to maturity and so influence the kingdom of God.

The first thing a leader is called to do is labor. The extra effort required of them they willingly do and get joy out of. To labor means they are sacrificing something else and this is part of their labor. This is an important calling and separates those who engage in leadership for fleshly reasons from those who are called of God. The fleshly leader wishes to do less than others and supposes that to be the privilege of a leader in the church. Jesus however worked while the disciples slept. He gave more.

The second thing spiritual leaders are called to is to take responsibility for those in the church. Paul says here they "have charge over you in the Lord." The idea is that they have been given a stewardship of trust that involves the care and well-being of the people of God. This phrase is the rendering of a single Greek word. It is a compound word, προϊσταμενους, formed by combining the preposition which means "in front of" with the word "to stand." It speaks of God's call to lead and give direction, to moderate and oversee. The calling compels one to rise above being a spectator in order to help establish and maintain an order that will advance the mission.

The third thing spiritual leaders are called to do is to give instruction. Believers, though inhabited by the Holy Spirit, do not by that have all the information and understanding they need to live the life. Spiritual leaders give instruction that equips people to carry out God's plan and desire for them. Their primary method is instruction. They do not coerce and drive people along. They lead the way toward greater and fuller understanding of the truth.

Those who are so called of God, whose heart is to labor, take responsibility for the welfare of others, and instruct them in the things of God are a great treasure. The local church that has a core of them is blessed of God. They should be recognized as their greatest treasure.

**5:13 “and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.”**

It is easy to take for granted those who faithfully lead the church. It is also very easy to be critical of them and to think poorly of them. We must resist this in the church. The nature of their calling and their gifting is such that they are to be esteemed highly.

The word rendered very highly is a rare word used only here in the New Testament. Paul takes a word which means an excess or abundance and prefixes two prepositions to it, the proposition *εκ*, meaning “out of”, and the preposition *υπερ*, meaning “over”. So we find a word which by etymology means “beyond out of abundance”. The word rendered “esteem” is *ηγεισθαι* the word for leading. It describes the act of leading oneself through a mental process so as to arrive at the point of having this high estimation of those who lead. To this already strong expression Paul adds the words “in love.” The result is a very clear high standard of treatment for those who give leadership to the church.

This is not a thing which leaders can effectively demand from those they lead, though many have used this verse to bludgeon their followers and to demand all manner of practice from those they lead that gratifies their own fleshly needs.

Respect for leaders can and should be taught in the church. It must, like all of Scripture, be preserved as the standard of the family of God. It must be strengthened by admonishment and strengthened by loving discipline. But in the end it is cultivated and is the response of Spirit-led people to the spiritual power they perceive in their leaders. Where it is absent the reason is always fleshliness because there is no doubt what the standard is. The flesh is being manifested on the part of the followers, the leaders, or both. But it can be the result of only one devious person in the mix to keep things stirred up. Where respect for leaders breaks down, it is certain that the lifeblood of the church has long since been poured out.

The verse ends with the expectation that all are to live at peace with one another. This has application to leaders and followers. The spiritual climate of the church can become unbearable were leaders and followers begin under-cutting each other. Living in peace demands a willingness to be vulnerable. Nothing disrupts peace quicker than one party who cannot let something go by admitting their own fault, or by sacrificing their personal rights. The ensuing tug-of-war always produces many casualties and makes all the enemies of Christ laugh. Obedience to this verse always requires vulnerability, the antithesis of our instinctive self-gratification and preservation.

**5:14 “and we urge you brethren, admonished the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men.”**

Paul continues a string of commands to the Thessalonians meant to produce and maintain spiritual health among them. This is his encouragement to them, the word encouragement is rendered “urge” in the NASB. As Paul comes alongside them with this letter these are the things he is urging them to do along with him. This is a kind of cadence they are to maintain in the journey.

As they travel together, they will notice each other entering into diverse experiences of life, each challenging their spiritual fitness, and each capable of launching them into disobedience. They must be a source of strength to each other in such times. This series of commands is meant to help them be for each other what they need to be. They can be seen as important elements of Christian friendship.

The first command in this verse is to be carried out with respect to the “unruly”. The word “unruly” is the rendering of a Greek word that means disorderly. In our language that evokes images is of rowdiness and excessiveness. The term is used only in the Thessalonians epistles. It seems to be referring to a way of life that was not ordered according to the sound teaching and the example of the apostles (2 Thessalonians 3:6). It is a word used of those whose financial affairs were not ordered, who did not work to provide for their own needs (2 Thessalonians 3:11). There is a way of living we can easily slip into in the pursuit of dreams, where we neglect the practical details of normal life, the routine chores that must be repeatedly done. Undone detail tends to accumulate and produce a crisis at some point, or at least an inability to function efficiently. Undone detail hangs on us like a loose flowing robe and inhibits the speed and agility that much of life and ministry requires.

Those whose lives move into such a phase we are to “admonish.” Admonishing is an important activity of Christ’s church. What exactly is admonishment? From an etymological standpoint, this word was formed by combining the word for the mind with the word for “to place or put”. So it has to do with placing in someone’s mind an idea or way of thinking. But there are number of ways to do that. We can look to the actual usages of the word in the New Testament and by observing the things associated with the word admonishment, get a picture of what it is.

In Romans 15:14 we find that being filled with goodness and knowledge made the Romans capable of admonishing each other. So we could say that admonishment involves accurate ideas flowing from a good heart—from one motivated properly and occupied with the things of God.

In Acts 20:31 we find that admonishment carried out by Paul was accompanied with tears and it was done individually and persistently. So we see that admonishment deals with ideas, it flows from a good heart, and it is accompanied by a show of one’s affection and love. It is intensely personal, on the part of the giver and the receiver.

1 Corinthians 4:14 indicates that admonishment can produce shame, though not intentionally. To some extent it must invoke shame to be effective (2 Thessalonians 3:14–15). It is likely that because it is so intense it can be misunderstood. In 1 Corinthians 4:14 Paul is concerned that his written words, meant to admonish, might be taken wrongly and so produce shame in the hearers. Whenever emotion is expressed, it can easily be expressed wrongly or it can be misinterpreted on the part of the hearer. Admonishment involves strong emotion and so must be carried out skillfully and prayerfully. Written admonishment, where tone is determined by word

choice and even punctuation is especially tricky. On the other hand, verbal admonishment can be entered into in the heat of the moment, very impulsively. It can run away very easily. So whatever the medium used, admonishment must be done with wisdom. Over-restraint of emotion produces a detached, clinical, heartless message. However, just speaking one's mind with no restraint usually puts the wrong thing in the mind of someone else. At that point all that has been achieved is the beginning of an argument, not admonishment.

In Colossians there are two significant usages of the term admonish (1:28; 3:16). We find that admonishment is an important part of bringing people to a point of maturity in Christ. In both passages in Colossians, admonishment is mentioned in connection with teaching. Yet it is distinct from teaching. It is likely linked to it because it addresses the mind. So again, we see that it deals in the realm of ideas and thought. In both passages in Colossians, it is also mentioned in connection with wisdom. To admonish well one must be wise. We also see in Colossians that admonishment can be done through songs (Colossians 3:16). Music is a great vehicle for it because it merges ideas and emotions and reaches both the mind and the heart. So we see in Colossians two ideas reinforced. First, admonishment is both mental and emotional. Second, it is a normal part of the Christian community.

We find the idea of “admonishment” spoken of in 2 Thessalonians 3:15. There the activity is contrasted with what our words might be like in addressing an enemy. Admonishment is said to be what we would give to a “brother,” not an enemy. Four observations can be made from this verse. First, it is affirmed that admonishment is to be a normal part of life in the family of God. Second, admonishment is to strengthen not destroy, hurt, or damage another. Third, admonishment is to be done in an embracing, affectionate way, that is, both direct and honest. Fourth, it is to flow out of a basic value and regard for another, not of disrespect.

Tying all of this together, admonishment is an affectionate stirring of another's minds so that they see more clearly the truth about a practical life matter. It is teaching, reminding, empathizing, counseling, correcting, and cheerleading all blended together. That is why it is to a large degree a lost art among the rank-and-file in the church.

The second command in this verse is to be carried out toward “the fainthearted”, literally the “small-souled.” This is the only time this term occurs in the New Testament. Paul knew what it was like to be faint-hearted. Though he does not use this term of himself, the words he does use elsewhere described his own faintness of heart in several different situations (Acts 27:20; 2 Corinthians 1:8; 7:5-6).

The command is that we should “encourage” those who are in such a state. The word used here is not the ordinary one used for encouragement. It is the word *παραμυθεισθε*, which occurs only four times in the New Testament. Its most telling use is in John 11:19, 31, where it is used of those who come to comfort Mary and Martha. It comes from the word *μυθος*, which means a tale or a myth, combined with the preposition *παρα*, meaning alongside. It likely represented the idea of sitting with someone and relating a story to them. The value of one's own story is found in such situations. This remains one of the most powerful means of encouragement and comfort. Those who have personally experienced a particular trial have unique credibility in the minds of those caught in the midst of it (see 2 Corinthians 1:4). So the term “encourage” here conveys the activity of empathizing, comforting, and encouraging, through shared and common experience.

The third command in this verse is regarding those who are weak. The term used is the term sick, but in usage it refers to any weakened condition. The action we are told to take is that of help. The word rendered help is a compound from *εχω*, meaning to hold, or to have, and *αντι*, meaning in behalf of, or in place of. The word came to be used of being loyal, or of supporting someone. It is used three other times in the New Testament (Matthew 6:24; Luke's 16:13; Titus 1:9). In all the usages it has the meaning of holding to something or someone. So the idea here is that we are to be advocates for the weak and a source of special support to them. It would apply to those who are physically weak, spiritually weak, or even the disenfranchised. We are to be different in that we stand for them, watch out for them, provide where they are unable to provide for themselves.

The fourth command has to do with all people and is that we are to be longsuffering. We are not to lose patience and give up on them. We are not to become cynical or bitter and withdraw from making the relational investment in them. There is no shortage of reasons to give up on the church or the mission of God in the minds and hearts of men. That is not to occur in us. Rather we are to be developing strength and endurance to push beyond the things that used to limit us, and specifically those things that used to make us say "enough!" People are such that we can become disillusioned with investing in them. Our reality is that we are the same as them. God has been patient and long-suffering with us. That should be our motivation to continue. The one who has been forgiven much will forgive much (Luke 7:47).

These four commands provide great guidelines for Christian friendship and fellowship. There are also great examples of the variety of things that spiritual leaders must do in the course of helping people to grow. In most areas Christians will recognize the need to encourage, and to help. But we typically react to admonishment, and we lose patience with each other very fast.

**5:15 "see to it that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men."**

There is a certain kind of behavior that every human being tends to sink into. It is reactionary, and it is a very natural impulse. We tend to treat others in the way they treat us, and that is why so many conflicts are unresolved and why so many relationships are broken. Few are able to resist the tug-of-war that ensues when misunderstanding develops. And so minor issues become divisive, and words take on an incendiary nature.

So natural it is this that we must watch for it in each other and rescue each other from this that is mere beastly living. We must help each other rise to the grace that characterizes godliness. We are to watch and be keenly observant for this that so easily can spring up in our fellowship.

The high road of love God has extended to us summons us to seek the good of all others. This quest for the good of others Paul says is to be our desire with all, not just those in the church. The phrase "seek after" is the same word used to describe persecution—*διωκετε*, or relentless pursuit. We are to run after this and lay hold of it relentlessly. Goodness for all men, meaning their welfare and their benefit at all things, should shape our behavior.

The good of humanity is the primary force that has shaped God's plan, and it should impact our agenda for each day. Merely treating another in the way we are treated perpetuates the sinfulness and sickness of humanity. By this we bring out the fleshliness in each other rather than the image of God. The downward spiral perpetuates itself until someone has the conviction to break it, step away, and use words and behavior that take all the emotion in a different direction. We need the help of each other to be the first to become vulnerable in this way. In this activity alone there is opportunity for immense impact.

### **5:16 “rejoice always;”**

Having just spoken against the great human tendency toward allowing the evil of others to generate in us a like reaction, Paul sets forth in the next three verses what could be called a “response trilogy.” He is going to name three things that are to characterize us. These three things will be mentioned with three terms that describe perpetual practice always, without ceasing, and in all things.

The first thing that is to characterize us is “always rejoicing”. This certainly has to do with what the larger perspective of God and His plan assures us is true. There is so much reason for joy in all of that truth. His unwavering love, His great care, His certain justice, the future home He is making for us, His immense reward for faithfulness all these have a way of shrinking the significance of present pain if we rejoice in them. And this is how Paul lived (2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10).

Rejoicing then, starts with a very intentional switching of one's mind from brooding over the present challenge to an eternal perspective on it. It involves asking what might this look like when in eternity I look back on it? How big is it, really? What important things might it achieve? But this is just the beginning of rejoicing. The real rejoicing comes with a focus on that which will be, not that which is. Rejoicing is a continual turning of the mind's eyes and forcing them to focus on the unseen. It is to celebrate the unseen.

### **5:17 “pray without ceasing;”**

This is the third time Paul has used this expression “without ceasing” in this letter (1:3; 2:13). Besides these usages in this letter that expression is used only one other place in the New Testament (Romans 1:9). Of its four usages, three have to do with prayer (Romans 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 5:17). Its single usage in a context that does not have to do with prayer is instructive (1 Thessalonians 1:3). There it speaks of Paul's constantly bearing in mind the work and love of the Thessalonians. The term used there defines the permanent image or memory he associates with the Thessalonians whenever he thinks of them. Unceasingly then, describes a “Pavlovian response”—a natural reaction. We could call it a place to which the mind instinctively leads and continually drifts. It is a new, learned instinct and reaction to life taught by the Spirit.

Prayer is to be that place for the believer. It is the activity that we are to emotionally drift into. It is to be done on behalf of us or any whom God might bring to mind in the moment. It is to be done for acquaintance and stranger, friend, and foe. Praying is to be natural to us, an instinctive response of our minds and hearts to whatever our mind or our senses become occupied with. When it ceases to be this, we can be certain that our minds have become idolatrous, and our affections have drifted to lower things.

This idea of praying without ceasing has often been presented as a continued conversation with God; a never-ending prayer in which the subject changes but an “Amen” is never uttered. There is nothing wrong with this ideal. But realistically, life requires your full concentration at several critical junctures each day. Paul’s words here are likely a call to us to constantly turn our minds to prayer in the more idle moments. We are not to cease from that disciplined rhythm that the Spirit can so use.

**5:18 “in everything give thanks; this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”**

Paul continues to give words here regarding our own emotional reactions to life’s varied moments. His words here are a call to either give thanks for all things (dative of reference), or in the midst of all things (locative of sphere). The latter seems most likely given the power and tragedy of evil in the world. This then is a command that we give thanks for what God has given us, no matter what life or people may send our way. In other words, we are to be seen as thankful people even in difficult circumstances. We are to feel a composure that is based on the surpassing value of all that is now certain in our lives in Christ, in the midst of all the more temporary discomforts and pains of the present evil and fallen world we experience.

Paul makes a special point of saying that this is God’s will for us “in Christ Jesus.” It is in Christ Jesus that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3). It is in Christ Jesus that we are coheirs of all that is God’s (Romans 8:16–17). God’s whole redemptive work is aimed at placing us in a position in which we are no longer vulnerable as slaves to evil and the evil world. It translates us from a position of dread about the future and in particular death, to a position of hope. It is based on certain actions God himself has taken that change our reality in terms of how He views us. For His own reasons He has made the decision to lavish on us privileges that overshadow all misfortunes of this life. His willful actions have removed a fundamental cause of our anxiety—fear of death (Hebrews 2:14–16). His will then is that we be consumed with joy and thanksgiving even in the midst of the difficulties, pain, and tragedy of this life (2 Corinthians 4:7–5:8). Our challenge is to let the joy of the destination be such that it overwhelms the pain of the journey.

**5:19 “do not quench the Spirit;”**

With these five words Paul brings up the subject that is of prime importance in individual people, in churches, in organizations, and actually in the entire world. Elsewhere we are told to do several things in relationship to the Spirit of God. We are told not to “grieve” the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). We are certainly not to blaspheme the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29). We are to be led by the Spirit, or walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16–25). We are to be filled, or controlled, by the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). We are to speak in harmony with the Spirit (Luke 12:12), pray in harmony with the Spirit (Ephesians 6:8), put to death through the Spirit the way of life we instinctively lead (Romans 8:13).

Scores of men and women have recognized the importance of this command. Since the Holy Spirit is the essence of that life we are given through the gospel, it is critical that we not thwart what He is doing. However, that might be done we don’t want to do it, or we have effectively guaranteed that we will at that point be practicing mere religion.



So many have spoken and written on this command. Most of the thought on this issue has run along these lines, that we grieve and quench the Spirit by a lack of faith, and by harboring known sin in our lives. It is hard to argue against that, given all the demonstrations of both those persistent conditions in the history of Israel and given the teachings of Christ and his apostles.

Perhaps another way of summarizing this quenching of the Holy Spirit's fire is to say that it is a failure to give proper attention and reverence to the truth as He applies it in our hearts. It happens when we resist that personal work He is seeking to lead us into. It happens when we resist those things He is seeking to do in the community of believers that we are a part of. So there is an individual quenching of the Spirit and a more collective one, and both are deadly in terms of the genuine life that new birth is to produce.

Paul uses the imagery of fire in this statement. It is a vivid one, in that fire produces power when it is brought to bear on the right instrument. It also produces warmth for both survival and comfort. Fire would provide an apt image for the centuries that were to come. The quenching of fire is usually intentional and however it is carried out it effectively removes fire's influence. Its capacity to produce change is absent.

In spiritual matters the power and energy of the Holy Spirit is essential to spiritual health and fitness. Remove His influence and there is no capacity for the work of the mission (Acts 1:8), no ability to be obedient (Romans 8:4-11; 1 Peter 1:2). It is the Spirit that gives capacity for effective defense of the faith (Matthew 10:20), for power over the evil one (Matthew 12:28), for saving faith (John 3:5; 1 Corinthians 12:3), for spiritual understanding (John 16:13), for personal direction (Acts 8:29; 13:2), for direction in ministry (Acts 16:7; 20:22), for recognition and acceptance of truth (1 Corinthians 2:10-14), for emotional well-being (Galatians 5:22).

It is not an exaggeration to say that without the Spirit, the Christian faith as a living organism disappears. It would have long since passed from the earth were it not for the Holy Spirit's intervention. All of this can be proved from the Old Testament prophetic statements, apart from the New Testament's witness to the Spirit's impact. Paul follows this statement with a series of thoughts that are important in carrying out this command not to quench the Holy Spirit's work.

#### **5:20 "do not despise prophetic utterances."**

The heart of the Holy Spirit's work in the community of God's people is His formulating in the minds of individuals messages that express God's heart and mind for the moment. These messages are vital to both individual health and the health of the movement. This activity is called "prophecy." That word is the English rendering of the compound Greek word formed from the preposition *πρὸ*, meaning in front of or prior, and the word *φημι*, meaning to show or make known one's thoughts. So combining the two words brought about a word which meant to speak before or in front of.

The origin of the term used in the Old Testament for prophet is disputed. But its usage shows that though its etymology is lost, its usage clearly is meant to convey that of an authorized spokesperson for Yahweh. This is established in three important texts in the Pentateuch (Exodus 6:28-7:1; Numbers 12: 1-8; Deuteronomy 18:9-22).

In Exodus 6:28-7:1, God commands Moses to speak his words to Pharaoh. Moses replies that he is unskilled in speech. God replies that He Himself will make Moses as

God to Pharaoh, and that Aaron would be Moses prophet. The idea is that Aaron would be an official, authorized spokesperson for Moses and thus for God. This clearly indicates how the word was understood and used. In the communication between God and Israel prophets were authorized spokespersons.

In Numbers 12:1-8, Miriam and Aaron seek to establish that they are Moses' peers in terms of conveying God's thought to Israel. This is a clear contradiction to what had been explained in Exodus 6:28-7:1. So God makes clear to them that He will speak through prophets to Israel, but distinguishes Moses as unique among such prophets. The messages to other prophets would come through dreams and visions. Moses' words would come from personal interaction with God. So the groundwork is laid for the submission of the words of other prophets to the standard of the words revealed by God through Moses.

In Deuteronomy 18:15-32, Moses says that Yahweh will raise up other prophets in Israel whom the Israelites are to listen to. But the possibility is raised in Moses words that there would be prophets who would speak presumptuously. The office was to be respected but the people were to examine the words of such prophets to be certain they were of Yahweh. The first test the people were to apply was that the message must conform to what they had already been told by Moses about worshiping Yahweh alone. Any message that urged them toward other gods, even if accompanied by authenticating signs, were to be categorically rejected (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). The pattern of testing spoken words through the grid of written revelation, would become the pattern for God's people (Isaiah 8:20). A second test was to be that of whether the things spoken by the prophet came true. There was to be an authenticating sign given by the prophets. In Deuteronomy then we find the office of prophet established. Christ, the prophet like Moses (Deut. 19:18-19), would be the ultimate manifestation of (Acts 3:22). We also find in Deuteronomy the responsibilities of the people towards such prophets that would be raised up by Yahweh.

The primary function of the prophets was to be a mouthpiece for Yahweh, an official spokesperson through whom He could bring to His people messages relating to all facets of their individual and collective lives. At times this involved a message about the future. But most often the focus even in these messages that concerned the future, was on present obedience.

Israel's calamities were avoidable had they paid proper attention to both the spoken and written words of the prophets (2 Kings 17:6-18; 18:12).

It seems apparent that the thousands of utterances made by the prophets over the centuries of the Old Testament era were generally not to be thought of as inherently authoritative. They were to be authenticated either by signs or by their agreement with Moses' writings. In our terminology, Moses written words were God-breathed. They provided a standard of judgment by which the validity of other messages could be measured (Isaiah 8:20). Gradually other writings were given the same function by a divinely directed human process. The result was that a limited number of prophetic utterances came to be the standard provided by God by which all things could be discerned and judged.

So there was to be this sorting process going on continually in the mind of the Israelites that utilized these sacred writings as the grid by which Yahweh's mind and heart could be known. This is the same activity Paul is summoning the church to.

The words of Paul to the Thessalonians show that like the people of God before them, the church's spiritual health depends on the proper response to these prophetic messages from Yahweh. A prophetic utterance was a message spoken in the name of God as if given by God and revealing His will for a member or members of His family. Paul's instruction is that these are not to be despised.

The very next verse in this context will capture the fact that neither are they to be accepted as without error. It will capture the same idea that we find in the Old Testament, the idea of sorting. However, the first step in the entire process of knowing the mind of God is not to despise prophetic utterances to become cynical and toss these all aside. It would be easy in the "sorting" of these to simply cast them aside and there are many examples in the Old Testament of individuals doing this to their own harm (Jeremiah 36:20-26; 2 Kings 7:1-20; 2 Chronicles 18:3-34; 1 Samuel 15:4-31).

The English word despise renders the Greek compound word ἐξουθενεῖτε, formed by prefixing the proposition ἐκ, meaning "out of", to the word οὐδεὶς, meaning "nothing." This word is used of rejection and contempt. It is the classic attitude of unbelievers toward truth (Luke 18:9; Acts 4:11; 1 Corinthians 6:4). It is something Christians can fall into as this and other passages indicate (Romans 14:3, 10; 1 Corinthians 16:11).

In every person the flesh makes certain kinds of messages more attractive than others. The flesh makes us vulnerable to flattery and makes us seek out commendation. The scars of the evil world and our damaged psyches create defensive reactions in us. We perceive hurt or attack where none is intended. We are drawn to "safe" words and positive messages. Our fallenness and the fallen world we live in also tend to make us resistant to authority and to authoritative words. We prefer making ourselves our own judge and final authority. The result is that humanity has a long history of despising prophetic utterances. We cower away from them, avoid them, or meet them with outright hostility.

So rooted is this in each of us that we dare not think for a moment in our life times that we are incapable of it. We must constantly ask ourselves, "what is God trying to say to me right now in this moment?" We must be ready to accept His thought from imperfect, fallen others, even when delivered poorly, in the wrong tone, and for the wrong reasons. Prophetic words can sting. But if we accept just pleasant words we arm the evil one against us. This is our classic way of quenching the Spirit. Prophecy is our lifeblood (Proverbs 29:18). We are in the ultimate safe place when we seek out and hold in high regard the prophetic word.

#### **5:21 "but examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good."**

In the writings of the Old Testament three principles are implicit regarding prophetic utterances, those statements about God's desire for His family made by a person claiming to be speaking for God. The first principle was that God would in fact orchestrate such prophetic messages, and they were to be sought out and obeyed (Deuteronomy 18:9-22). The second was that there could and would be false prophets, those supposedly speaking for God that were in fact speaking on their own initiative (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). The third was that there were messages breathed out from God that had the inherent authority of His presence and essence, that have a greater authority than the more normal prophetic utterances.

This third principle, this contrast of authority, is first apparent in the spoken words of Moses which God clearly distinguishes from those of his contemporaries (Numbers 12:1-8). Later, this authority is extended to Moses' book, the Pentateuch (Josh. 1:8; Psalm 1:1-3; Isaiah 8:20; Mal. 4:4). It expanded over the years to include the other writings known to us as the Old Testament, a practice affirmed by Christ (John 10:35), and the New Testament writers (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:16-21). These special revelations were later referred to as "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), and were to serve as an infallible standard by which all other prophetic utterances were judged (Isaiah 8:20).

When Paul gives this command to the Thessalonians in this verse to "examine everything carefully," he is simply re-establishing in the church the principle that God had set forth for His people centuries before. There is great safety in the words of written revelation (Psalm 119). They are a consistent standard whereby all supposed messages from God can be sorted through.

The word Paul uses in this command to examine everything carefully is δοκιμάζετε. It occurs 23 times in the New Testament. It is used of the process of testing an animal purchased by putting them to work, in order to document the claims of the seller (Luke 14:19). It speaks of a process that allows someone's character to be affirmed to others (1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:22; 1 Timothy 3:10). It is use of the internal process of arriving at a right conclusion, appropriate to data received (Luke 12:56). It speaks to arriving at a conclusion that is to be retained as valuable and life-shaping (Romans 1:28). It speaks to the aftermath of such a process whereby one's life becomes a kind of living documentation for others of what is true and right (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 5:10; Philippians 1:10). It is used of the process by which we establish our own credibility (Galatians 6:4; 2 Corinthians 13:5). It is used of the ongoing work by which God will reward those things we pursue for the right reasons (1 Thessalonians 2:4; 1 Corinthians 3:13). It is use of the consequences of the actions and thoughts of men that reveal the character of God (Hebrews 3:9).

The idea of Paul's use of the word is to exhort us to arrive at the right decision about the content of prophetic utterances. That decision is neither a categorical rejection of them, nor categorical acceptance of them. It is the testing of its elements and accepting that part of it that expresses Yahweh's heart and mind. Then by one's response and application of that which is of the Lord, his way is documented, or we could say identified and illuminated for others as legitimate. So testing is more than deciding what is right and being right. It is to be one who authenticates by action the way of truth for others who have a heart to follow.

This idea which comes out in the use of the term δοκιμάζετε, is reinforced by Paul's command to hold fast to what is good. The word Paul uses is κατέχετε. It is used by Matthew of taking by force something for one's own possession (Matthew 21:38). It is used by Luke of an emotional/spiritual embrace of someone so as to have their company and influence (Luke 4:42). Luke also uses it of setting a course in a boat (Acts 27:40). It is used by John of having a disease (John 5:4). Paul uses the term of one's position with respect to truth (Romans 1:18; 7:6), a truth position they hold to. He also uses it of possessing material things (1 Corinthians 7:30; 2 Corinthians 6:10). Is the term Paul uses of orthodoxy and keeping a straight doctrinal course (1 Corinthians 11:2; 15:2). Similarly Paul uses it of the Spirit's work of restraining the forces of evil (2 Thessalonians 2; 6-7). So this is a word applied to many different situations where the idea of the holding down of something so as to secure it for oneself is in view. The

term “hold fast” expresses both intentionality and value inherent in that which can be verified as Yahweh’s message.

#### 5:22 **“abstain from every form of evil.”**

The King James version has here the phrase “abstain from all appearance of evil.” From the meaning of this English rendering of this text arose a teaching that Christians were to do nothing that could be construed by anyone at any time from any point of view to be evil. A kind of radical separation from anything that could possibly be even twisted and distorted so as to become a false accusation of evil was imposed on the followers of Christ. The absurdity of this is that Jesus himself did not live this way. He was, by His deliberate actions, accused of all manner of evil (Matthew 9:9–13; 11:19; Luke 15:1–7). Ironically, such non-Christian thinking has been typical historically of many who rejected both written prophecy and prophetic utterances of the kind Paul is speaking of here.

Paul’s intent is to remind readers that evil has many forms, from a blasphemous, promiscuous look to a pious and religious look. It can advocate asceticism as easily as it advocates licentiousness. In examining prophetic utterances, we must search for both disguises, and all the mixtures in between these extremes. We will find them in most every prophetic message to varying degrees. That which is fleshly easily creeps into our words to one another, particularly when we speak in a directive way with the boldness of the Spirit choreographs in such moments.

This third command is meant as the previous two are, to encourage and strengthen the practice of speaking prophetically, declaring to each other Yahweh’s heart and mind for one another. “Abstaining” can be illustrated by conversation between Jesus and His disciples. Judas spoke directly and powerfully about concern for the poor. A less spiritual man than Jesus would have felt convicted and cowered under Judas’ penetrating words. Jesus saw through them. Time authenticated Jesus’ judgment of the thought and word from Judas (John 12:1–8).

The record of that event and the other gospel accounts indicates that the disciples and perhaps the majority of those present had the same wrong impulse and were drawn to the words of Judas (Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9). We must be people whose senses are trained through use so that we are able to discern between good and evil (Hebrews 5:14). We must be able to spot and turn away from the myriads of disguises evil utilizes. Any action that is directed apart from the leading of the Holy Spirit is a sin, even if it falls under the category of good deeds by the judgment of men.

#### 5:23 **“now may the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

This is Paul’s blessing to the Thessalonians that points to what Christ would do in each of them at the moment of His return to earth to rule. It is a blessing which will only be partially realized during our present earthly lives. It will be realized wholly and completely by all of us when our bodies are transformed at Christ’s return.

There are two verbal ideas expressed in this blessing in prayer by Paul on behalf of the Thessalonians. Both are expressed in what is called the optative mood, a less common verb form in the writings of the New Testament. It is employed when someone is

expressing their dream or hope or prayer for someone else. Once Paul's desire for the Thessalonians is understood, it can be understood why he uses the optative mood, a mood that expresses what could be called an indefinite future conditional state.

The two verbal ideas Paul expresses are for the Thessalonians to be sanctified, and for them to be kept. The verb sanctified is *αγιασθαι*, which means to set apart for special use. It implies a uniqueness, a difference from what would be normal function. The verb "kept" is a word that means to guard and keep securely

There are two adverbs in the English rendition that modify these two verbs. They occur close together, separated only by the conjunction "and" in the Greek text. Both words in the Greek text start with the same sound. They are *ολοτελεις* and *ολοκληρουσια*. Both are compound words that utilize the word *ολος*, which means "whole" or "all." In choosing two words with a similar sound Paul is seeking to draw attention to the fact that he is not just seeking the mere smattering of sanctification and protection from God. He is fully praying for sanctification. Paul's words convey the idea that they would become "wholly holy," or wholly mature and complete. *ολοκληρουσια* conveys the idea that all parts of their being would be kept "wholly whole." In other words, Paul is praying that every part of their beings, their spirit, soul, and body remain united.

This could be a prayer that they will physically live to see Jesus' return, their spirit, soul, and body remaining united as they are in anyone who is physically alive. It could be that this is a prayer for bodily resurrection/transformation and return to completeness should death come before Christ. Remaining alive until Christ's return was an expression of a desire they clearly had and that Paul shared with them. This could also be taken as a prayer that in this life they would grow to the maturity God had for them both within and without.

In Paul's words here God is emphatically identified as the one whom Paul is depending on to bring this all about. It is true that he uses the optative mood. But the next verse will show his confidence in God's ability in these matters. It is God himself, and Him alone, whose intervention brings about such things for us. That does not mean they are guaranteed. The first wish, that they become "wholly holy," requires our willing participation. It is not that God could not bring it about. The answer to the question of whether God CAN do something is always "yes!" as long as it does not conflict with His character and will. So the question is always what DOES HE DESIRE to do. He desires to draw humanity along toward Him, but to do so in such a way that their decision is made of their own volition. The result is that people experience varied degrees of sanctification, from the completely unregenerate to the mature, Christ-like believer.

God has a plan that is being carried out in time according to which relative few will escape the experience of physical death. That may be the desire of many, and has been, but because His plan involves a set time that we cannot alter, most will not have that prayer and desire met.

For these reasons Paul uses the indefinite expression conveyed by the optative mood. These things are his hope and dream for himself and the Thessalonians. It is right to pray such things, since that which God intends to do, He orchestrates prayer for. So it is right to ask and it is right to do so unashamedly. In the end both our will and God's come into play in matters of sanctification.

The experience of human life is the experience of one's body, soul, and spirit being united in one whole. We can easily identify our body. Our souls are normally understood to be the sum of our thoughts and feelings as they exist in our minds. So there is a unity between ourselves our physical bodies, our minds, senses, and various electro—chemical substances, all of these being creators and hosts of such feelings and thoughts.

Defining our spirits is a little more difficult (Hebrews 4:12). Our spirit is that which gives life to our body and keeps its functions going. The word means “air” or “breath” and is associated with that which is the essence of our experience of life (Genesis 2:7). The spirit is not just air. It is a part of our being, more basic to our makeup than our genetic code. It is sourced in God and it returns to him and so brings about our death (Ecclesiastes 12:7). All of these are brought together by God to function in a cohesive interdependent whole.

We can say that humanity is a tripartite unity of body soul and spirit. Some within Christianity have preferred to see humanity as a bipartite unity. They see the term spirit as speaking simply of man's inner being, body the outer being, and the term soul as referring to the unified whole. This idea can be sustained from the evidence here although this passage in 1 Thessalonians is the strength of the argument for understanding humanity to be a tripartite unity.

All these peripheral ideas that we are led into by the words of Paul can divert us from his primary thought. The primary thought is that God, the Creator Himself, is personally interested in our desire for holiness now and for security for eternity. No less a one than He Himself can be looked to for such empowerment of faith and service.

#### **5:24 “faithful is He who calls you, and he also will bring it to pass.”**

God is faithful and does what He has promised in behalf of those He is called to Himself. So this verse begins in terms of its logic with the call of God to believe in Him. All of Scripture is testimony to the fact that He is faithful to those He calls, even in cases where they are unfaithful. There was no stronger evidence of this than the faith of Gentiles like those in Thessalonica. They were people of faith because of God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3). They were blessed because God blessed Abraham, who responded to the call of God and believed.

The story of Abraham's descendants is essentially a story of God bringing His plan to pass, and doing so in spite of their horrible unfaithfulness. He demonstrates through them His ability to bring blessing without compromising His justice and to do it all through many tarnished and outright evil people. God is faithful. That is what His plan will prove and demonstrate to all when it is completed. Nothing is a stronger statement of His might.

The concept of God's faithfulness is an important one to understand. To express this idea, the Old Testament writers used words that came from the primitive Hebrew root “aman”. The root idea of that word is firmness or certainty. It is used of the work of a parent making a child strong or pillars supporting a building. From this Hebrew word came the Greek expression *αμην*, rendered “verily” or “truly”, an expression frequently used by Jesus. From this Greek word came the English word “Amen.” This word then, rather than to merely signify the end of the prayer, should be an expression of certainty and assurance of the Lord's ability, a one-word summary of what Paul is

saying in this verse. From its mundane use to express firm and steady hands, it is used almost entirely in Scripture to express God's total dependability (Deuteronomy 32:4), and that of His words (Psalm 119:86; 43:1), and works (some 33:4).

One of these word derivatives is "emet," the Hebrew word which means truth. Knowing this allows us to see that the truth is that which is certain and dependable. It is pictured as inherent in God and in the way in which He is leading (Genesis 24:27; Exodus 34:6; Psalm 31:5; Jeremiah 10:10). Because it is characteristic of Yahweh, truth becomes how men know and serve Him (Joshua 24:14; 1 Kings 2:4; Isaiah 38:30).

But from a more pragmatic view, because it is God's word on a matter, truth is what will be left standing when God's actions are complete in any matter. So truth is not only what is right, truth is Yahweh's footprint, and to follow it is to walk in the way that will lead us to observe and experience Him. Truth then, is not just an important pursuit for intellectual or philosophical reasons. It is a very pragmatic issue, certain to yield good pragmatic results.

Because God is faithful, He can be counted on to bring to pass what he has promised. To our prayer for bodily resurrection and glorification we can confidently add the "Amen!" It is certain because of God's firmness in the matter.

#### **5:25 "brethren, pray for us."**

This statement by Paul is in the imperative, a command. It is so critical that we pray for those who lead us. Leadership and ministry is such that whatever the complexities of our lives, it is certain that theirs is even more so. The more influence one has the greater challenges they face from the evil one, from people, from their own flesh, from their body, and from their emotions. The more influence they have, the more they are misunderstood, the thornier the issues that they deal with, the more people will be impacted by their decisions. As their sphere of influence increases the demands on their time grow, they have less time to reflect and recharge their own souls, and there is greater opportunity for bitterness and cynicism to overtake them.

The world of a leader changes as God grants them more opportunity. God's grace is sufficient for the demands on them, but that grace comes through the prayers of many. Very often they are so admired and viewed as so strong, that prayers for others take precedence. The work Paul was doing would shape the Christian church for centuries. It is certain that he himself did not understand just how significant it was. Prayer for it was a tremendous investment of one's time. It is doubtless that eternity will reveal many silent prayer partners that at the Spirits urging asked and received the very things Paul needed in the moment.

#### **5:26 "greet all the brethren with a holy kiss."**

Four other times in the New Testament this kind of command occurs (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14). The word kiss is φιληματι, which comes from the word φιλος, the word for a friend. It was a common way of greeting among friends and the cultures of the Mediterranean world.



The significant thing about this command is likely not the idea of the kiss, but the idea that it is to be holy. There is to be no deviousness in our relationships in the church, as was the case with Judas and Jesus. Our heart and mind are to be united in this gesture so that our greeting and embrace of each other is sincere. Their kiss was to be more than a routine, as it could become in their culture, more than good manners, and being sociable. It was to be a gesture of loyalty, friendship, and sincere regard.

Given the circumstances of Judas betrayal of the Lord with a kiss, this form of greeting could have been stricken from the church's practice. But it was not. Instead, we are called to practice it in sincerity. All such cultural practices can be and are perverted. We are called to practice them in holiness.

One of the things that can be missing in churches is the practice of true, warm, affectionate friendship. It is a great human need. Part of the human experience is the seeking out of relationships of common interest. In that we reflect the Godhead.

Individually we may seek friends to varying degrees, depending on our personality type. But the fact is that it is not good for anyone to be alone. (Genesis 2:18). And so we seek spouses and also friends. The church is to be a place where such friendships bloom and grow. It is such a place when we make things like sincerity, truthfulness, selflessness, and empathy the rule of our lives. It is in this sense that our kisses are to be holy.

There is an inclusiveness to this command. Circles of friendship can easily become closed, and in their own way self-serving. There is to be an open embrace that extends to all the brethren.

#### **5:27 "I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren."**

Paul uses strong language here, that of placing someone under solemn oath before God. We do not know why he did this. It could be that it was a way of expressing urgency regarding the message of the letter and that this was the Spirit's way of signaling the importance of this letter. It could be that Paul sensed that the leaders might report what Paul said rather than reading it. There would be great danger in that, even if no evil intent was involved, and particularly over the centuries. Whatever the motivation it shows that already emphasis was being placed on the actual words of the apostles not just ideas, or an oral tradition.

The phrase "all the brethren" at the very least means all those in Thessalonica. It could have a wider audience in mind since we know this practice was occurring (Colossians 4:16). Whatever the intent of the statement it was prophetic!

### **5:28 “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you”**

No matter who we are as believers, whether mature or unseasoned, young, or old, grace is what we need. Grace used in this way refers to the moment-by-moment favor granted by Yahweh to strengthen us for all that He wishes to do in and through us. We are warned in Scripture that we can fail with respect to this grace (Hebrews 12:15-17). We fail when we react fleshly to people in the circumstances of real life and exert our will in the situation. The result is that rather simple matters can become complex and very destructive.

On the contrary, when we are determined by His power to make of everyday situations that which glorifies God, the result is always our peace and rest. We may give ground in the actual issue at stake, as Abraham did with Lot (Genesis 13:8-18). But we stand with Yahweh and that is the securest of places. Through His grace bitter things can be sources of great eternal wealth. His desire is that we share His joy of bringing about good through evil.