

2 THESSALONIANS COMMENTARY

Thessalonica, or Thessaloniki, was a city founded around 315 BC by the King Cassandra of Macedon. He named it after his wife Thessaloniki a half-sister of Alexander the great. Her name means “the Thessalonian victory”, memorializing the Macedonian victory at the Battle of Graco’s field (350 BC). Over time Thessalonica grew to be an important trade hub, located on the Via Ignatius which facilitated trade between Europe and Asia. The city exists to the present day though traumatized over the centuries. It was occupied by Nazi troops from April 22, 1941, through October 30, 1944. In 1943, 50,000 of the city’s Jews were sent to the gas chambers. 11,000 Jews were deported to labor camps, most of whom did not survive.

By Paul’s day the entire region had experienced much intrigue with the rise and decline of the Greek empire and the rise of Rome. It is likely that Paul visited the city several times. His letters to the church there are among the earliest documents of the Christian faith. If they were written around 50 to 51, as tradition attests, then they probably existed before the gospel accounts. So there is a strong possibility that they were the earliest of the New Testament writings.

The second letter followed quite quickly after the first. The occasion for it was to correct the Thessalonians thinking that had resulted from a fraudulent letter supposedly from Paul that the day of the Lord was “at hand.” Now Christians of all eras have held on to the hope of Christ’s return, but these felt its imminence so strongly that it seems they had quit gainful pursuits and other normal life routines and were idly awaiting Jesus’ appearance. The first letter had affirmed that such a day would come. The second letter discloses that certain concrete signs would more plainly mark the years immediately preceding that great event. Since these concrete signals had not transpired, the Thessalonians should continue in their normal rhythms and routines. They and all Christians are to remain faithful to such things until Christ appears. This is the overall purpose and message of the second letter.

2Thessalonians 1	2
2Thessalonians 2.....	12
2 Thessalonians 3	31

2 Thessalonians 1

1:1 “Paul and Sylvanus and Timothy to the church of Thessalonians and God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The same three individuals are named here as those who wrote the first letter to Thessalonica. The first was Silas who is mentioned in Acts 15:22 as a leader among the believers presumably in Jerusalem and beyond. He is chosen there as an official spokesperson to the Gentile churches for the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. He is also said to be a prophet by gifting (Acts 15:32). He becomes Paul's partner on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40). It was in the early stages of that journey when they arrived at Lystra that they met a disciple named Timothy, and he joined them in their journey (Acts 16:1–3). It was on this journey that Paul received the vision for Macedonia, and the gospel began to be established on the continent of Europe. Beginning at Philippi they came in a short time to Thessalonica. So the three individuals have a history with the Thessalonians.

The greeting of the first and second letter reads almost the same, except in this second letter God is referred to as “our” Father. One can only speculate as to the reason for the slightly more personal picture of the church's relationship to God. Perhaps Paul wanted to stress its origin in a little deeper way, given the trial they were enduring, the likely animosity of unbelieving Jews who viewed God as their Father, and some of the corrections he had to make in their thinking.

In Christian theology God the Father is represented as the progenitor of the church, made up of His sons and daughters. Christ is its designated head, its anointed ruler, the one through whom we are adopted as children of God. The wording here reflects this thinking and reminds us of the great and sacred nature of the church and the profound importance to God of its health and well-being. To strengthen it is to do that which is His heart. To ignore or trouble or abuse it is to trifle with that which arouses His deepest affections.

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

This concept of conveying God's blessing was important in Hebrew thought. Paul's letters each opened with this greeting and blessing—the call for God's grace and peace on those he is addressing. Yahweh's blessing is the thing portrayed in the writings of Moses as having been lost in Eden. It was Yahweh's heart to restore this to humanity and the Israelites would be key players in this (Genesis 12, 15). God's lovingkindness was seen as the compelling force behind His actions in this regard and specifically His covenantal commitment to Abraham and his offspring. Among these God wished to bring about the experience of His peace. The grace and peace of Paul's theology equates with the *chesed* and *shalom* that is the repeated theme of the writings of the Old Testament. These capture a significant portion of the promises of the old covenant that are fulfilled in the present to those who live under the new covenant.

Grace refers to the undeserved favor of God that flows toward humanity solely because of God's love for them. It is His favorable disposition that has resulted in the restoration to friendship and union with Yahweh for many. It is His personal intervention in individuals to strengthen them in trial and temptation, and to empower

them for godliness. So grace covers the gamut of action taken by a loving Creator that reveals His continual presence in and around His people.

Peace is the composure and confidence that grow where knowledge of His power and presence is. It is trust in who He is and that He is actively present, it changes anyone's perspective on what their eyes see, and their emotions feel. The more He is truly known the more invasive is His peace and the more tangible is the life change He can bring about.

Grace and peace are the heart of a vital experience of Jesus Christ. They enable us for the constant discovery of our own inadequacies. They empower us to be something different than what our instincts would make of us. They are the need of our every moment.

1:3 “we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows even greater.

Paul is writing to the Thessalonians because of a problem in their thinking. The problematic thinking is producing a serious contradiction in them. But there is an upside to what is happening among them that Paul commends at the outset. It is no small compliment paid to them here by Paul, who sees two things about them that stimulate thanksgiving in his own heart.

First, their faith is greatly enlarged. The word Paul uses occurs only here in the New Testament. It is formed by prefixing the preposition “over” to a word that means to grow. So this term speaks of something that is “over-grown”, which has come to exceed expectations in size or scope. He sees that they have an ability to trust God that has greatly expanded, beyond what he himself would expect. When this is seen in people it is commendable and it is only fitting to thank God for it.

Now this is an interesting thing to ponder considering what is coming in the rest of Paul's letter. We know that they were thinking wrongly about the time and season they were living in. They were thinking that God's appointed day of judgment for the world was at hand (Isaiah 2:12-21), the day of the Lord. The result was that they were neglecting the normal routines of life such as providing for themselves financially. There was a growing financial dependence among them, whereas Paul had modeled personal responsibility and independence in such things. So though their belief was wrong, they were acting on it and trust was shaping their lives. So convinced were they that the Lord would return any day that this expectation shaped their activity. Though wrongly placed, that trust was a good thing that needed to be more precisely instructed.

Their increased love for each other may also have been related to this errant thinking as well. It seems there was an increasing willingness to share and minister to one another's physical needs. There was more of a communal spirit than was appropriate. But there was a setting aside of self-centeredness, which has a tremendous upside.

So Paul is writing a letter of concern for errant thought and their lack of alignment with the pattern of life he had modeled for them. He sees even in this something he does not want to squelch entirely. They have the right idea, they just needed faith and love that were more precisely directed by knowledge.

It seems that God commands trust and love no matter how crude. He's attracted to it, more than He is to the mixed bag of a more precise human knowledge and routine. That is not to say that the mere presence of faith and love is enough. But it seems that He meets these with more information that then directs them to that which more fully aligns with Him. The smugness and indifference that can come with knowledge tend to alienate Him, and He waits for humility. But faith and love seem to foster a full helping of grace from Him that results in more precise knowledge. This seems to be what is happening in the Thessalonians through the instruction they receive in this letter. Their faith and love, already extraordinary, will now become more precisely appropriate to the season His plan was in.

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

As in the first epistle Paul speaks of the good example the Thessalonians are to other churches (1 Thessalonians 1:6-10). Paul boasted, spoke with admiration and respect to other churches of two things that stood out to him about the Thessalonians. The two things, patience and faith, were even more remarkable given the persecution and trouble they were experiencing. The picture Paul's words paint is that these were like the weight that was trying to crush them, but they were holding up. And as they held up under the difficulty of this their faith would become “greatly enlarged.” (verse 3). They were thriving spiritually in a tough environment. Under this great weight where one might expect to find destruction and ruin, there was vibrant life.

Completely foreign to some personalities and natural in others, patience, the ability to set and maintain a course amidst multiple distractions and disappointments, is one of the signs of the presence and control of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Patience is one of the constants found in the people of God over the ages. The enemy in the world will soon undo anyone who does not learn it. It is one of the earliest fruits to show in believers yet one of the most difficult to bring to its full maturity. It is a great achievement to be held up as a model of patience.

Faith is a great virtue that moves God and that, when rightly placed, is unique to His economy. Faith is the fingerprint of God when it is found to be placed in Him and in His Son Jesus. There is no other explanation for its presence (Ephesians 2:1-10).

There was in the early church a greater sense of the universality of the movement, or that is at least the impression one gets. This was despite the slow nature of communication. The more centralized nature of the leadership allowed for stories like that of the Thessalonians to be shared. The power of mutual example is significant, and a good leader should work at spreading good stories of faith and patience.

1:5 “this is a plain indication of God’s righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.”

The continual rise of the Thessalonian Christians to greater faith in Christ, even in the face of greater persecution from the godless, was concrete evidence of several significant things. First, it could only be explained as a work of God. He had given them by his Spirit faith and was strengthening it against all odds. It was not just that it didn't break in the face of persecution. It got stronger. So their story was concrete

evidence that God had made a judgment call and sided with the Thessalonians Christians.

Second, it was concrete evidence that evil and evil people needed to be judged if indeed there is a sovereign and just God. He is vindicated in His plan that provides an appointed day when He will act in great wrath and vengeance against all who stood against Him (Isaiah 2:12-22). The acts of the wicked against the people of God are atrocities that demand justice.

Third, the story of growing faith in such an environment will condemn the wicked in the coming day of the Lord. Christians like the Thessalonians will have clearly shown that faith is possible, and righteousness is possible even in an evil world. All excuses will be removed by God through exhibits of faith provided over the centuries by normal people. These, against all odds, persevered in a lifestyle of faith. So their story plainly indicates that God's eventual condemnation of the wicked is right and just. The judgment of all present will be that those who are saved deserve to be saved due to their faith in Yahweh. That is an important point that a proper doctrine of grace can cause us to initially object to. Our faith will clearly be shown to be the work of God, the clear mark of those who have responded obediently to the leading of His Spirit in them.

In this verse Paul affirms the belief in the day of the Lord. It will be a day of wrath and vengeance (Revelation 6:15-17). There is this day God has appointed to bring evil and evil people to judgment (Isaiah 2:12-17). So the Thessalonians were right in believing in such a day. Their understanding of its timing needed to be corrected. But from the outset Paul affirms that such a day rightly exists in the planned program of God. The fact that people of faith are victimized and abused by those not of faith is an indicator of this. The just and sovereign God, Yahweh, could only allow such a condition if He planned to justly deal with it.

1:6 “for after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,”

With these words Paul sets forth the idea that the persecution of the church affirms the righteous and just nature of God's plan to visit the world with retribution. He is vindicated by a grassroots, and common-sense form of justice, not a construed or transcendent one. The acts of God's enemies have been carried out willfully. In the language of our day, they are competent to stand trial and informed enough to be held accountable. For the affliction they've meted out or condoned, they will be afflicted. Their decision to live apart from God will be fully granted to them. They will live apart from Him, and so from His mercy and saving intervention.

The role of the human will and salvation has perplexed and divided Christian thinkers. This comes into play in processing these verses, though it is not Paul's subject here. Paul's teaching is clearly that the rule of common-sense justice will not allow the hostile actions of unbelievers to be excused because they are not of the elect. It is certain that they can be pardoned, as in the case of Paul himself. His own testimony was that he persecuted the church out of ignorance and was pardoned (1 Timothy 1:13-16).

This idea that some persecution flows from ignorance is affirmed by Jesus' great request on the cross for those who persecuted him (Luke 23:34). So it appears, in the case of those who persecute Christianity, that they have legitimate opportunity to step away from their hostility to the faith and embrace it. Some do. Others do not.

We can only speculate on the tension involved in the interaction of the divine and human will in such individual decisions. But Paul is clearly saying that by the common sense of ordinary justice, those who afflict must receive affliction unless pardoned because of their faith. The standard of justice he is appealing to is not a contorted contrived one that only God goes by. It is the same one we think by. This demands that we understand that no one need be blinded forever by evil. Their ignorance at some point becomes willful.

Conversely, Paul's statement seems to indicate that faith is a legitimate human achievement. Though impossible apart from His grace, God's acceptance of the people of faith will not be viewed as arbitrary, or whimsical, or the luck of the draw. There is some role of the human will and persevering in faith allows those who have it to be deemed "worthy of the kingdom of God" (verse 5), by the standard of common justice. It seems then that these verses implicitly argued to maintain the tension between the sovereignty of God and the will of individual human beings. Some series of activities by Him and humanity, concealed within this tension, will heighten His glory by displaying His faultless justice.

The idea that it is just for God to afflict anyone is rapidly fading from the thought of twenty first century Western minds. But this is the clear testimony of Scripture. When the thoughts of humanity are revealed, along with the misery and pain that resulted from all those thoughts, affliction will be the just sentence. The thrust of this verse is that God will give to unbelieving humanity that which they gave to others.

None of this is to say that because God afflicts in judgment, all affliction is of Him. The verse clearly shows that His affliction comes as an act of judgment against that which has been perpetrated by others. There is affliction in the world for one reason--because of evil. Justice demands that such unjust affliction be justly dealt with. God is the judge that will see that justice is served.

1:7 "and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire."

Jesus spoke of his return to Earth in terms like this, using the words "power and great glory" to describe the way He would return (Matthew 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28). This agrees with the end toward which God is moving events on this Earth that Daniel had prophesied of (Daniel 7:13-18). Fallen humanity is on a collision course with its appointed ruler, the Son of Man, Jesus the Christ.

Having just spoken of the affliction that awaits those who persecute the people of God, Paul speaks in passing of what he calls "relief" that God will grant to people like the Thessalonians and himself who have persevered in faith. He anticipates this relief would be provided by the return of Jesus Christ to earth to rule. Paul also anticipates the return of Jesus would occur in his lifetime. This was a feature of the New Testament church thinking. They believed that the day of the Lord would arrive in their lifetime. This belief was never discouraged by the apostles. It was only affirmed with statements like this one from Paul (see also Peter in 2 Peter 3:8-15). This was the hope of the writers of the New Testament.

Many have rightly pointed out the contrast between Christ's first advent at Bethlehem and His second advent. The first was marked by humility, an unassuming manner, the laying aside of His rights as creator and sustainer of humanity. His second coming will be marked by seizing control of humanity's affairs, and His enforcing His will in the

day-to-day life on the planet. He will demand and gain submission to His authority. Both advents involve Jesus serving the agenda of God the Father. Both involve the salvation and redemption of creation. Both advents are governed by love and justice. Both reveal the glory of God. Both reveal the fallen nature of humanity.

Yet the advents are distinctly different in terms of the manner employed by God and the results brought about on earth. There is a very visible progression in the plan of God for creation in the two advents, whatever the elapsed time between the two will be. This great coming event is the subject that Paul will now begin to pursue in his letter to the Thessalonians. He wanted them to anticipate it, but to do so wisely and in accordance with what we know of it through God's written revelation.

1:8 “dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In the Greek text the phrase “in flaming fire” is a part of this verse, though it is part of the previous verse in the minds of many of those who gave us our English versions. Some believe the imagery of that phrase either has to do with Jesus' physical appearance (i.e., Revelation 2:18), or captures the phenomenon that accompanied Jesus' physical presence at the second coming (i.e., Matthew 24:27; Luke 17:24). These place it with verse one.

Others see fire as a symbol of judgment and point to this verse as an example. They would see Jesus using fire against his enemies as a part of subduing them. They also point to the eventual assignment of the wicked to hell, a place of fire (Luke 16:24), as the ultimate revenge that is taken against them. And so, they see the phrase as belonging to verse two.

Both ideas align with the teaching of Scripture. Jesus appears a certain way in Scripture because it is consistent with who He is and what He does. And so His appearance as a lamb in prophetic writings is consistent with His being the Lamb of God. And His appearance here in flaming fire or with flaming fire is consistent with him being the just Judge and King of the earth.

Retribution is something Christians are not allowed to deal in (Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30). Because we must strike it from our own personal thinking toward others and train ourselves to wince at the thought of it, we often forget that it is certainly an element of justice (1 Peter 2:14). It is not a part of our commission, but it is assigned to civil government (Romans 13:1-7), and ultimate responsibility for it lies with God Himself. He will carry out vengeance (Luke 18:7-8). This is a big part of God's vision for an appointed time He calls “the day of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:12-22). That is the day Paul is referring to here and it is referred to throughout Scripture as “the day of the Lord” (Isaiah 13:9-13; Joel 2, 3:14-17; Amos 5:18-20; Obadiah 1:15-18; Zephaniah 1:14-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10).

“The day of the Lord” is not just one day, but a whole series of them adding up to over 1000 years in Scripture if it is to be taken literally. It is the day of the Lord in the sense that He is visibly and undeniably present and ruling in the day-to-day affairs of the earth. The period begins with retribution that He carries out against evil (Luke 21:22).

The term retribution is formed by the preposition at, meaning “out of” joined to the term δικη, meaning right or just. So in the formation of the word itself is the idea that retribution is rooted in the concept of justice. It can safely be said from a biblical point

of view that justice has not triumphed until retribution is carried out against injustice. This is done in our justice system in the U.S. through prosecution under criminal or civil law to the perpetrator of the injustice. From the beginning this has been the commission of civil authority even though it is administered by sinful humans (see Genesis 4:17-24).

The retribution of God will be directed against all whose lives reflected two failures Paul identifies; failure to know God and failure to obey the gospel of Jesus Christ. The first failure Paul mentions does not refer to ignorance of facts about God. Rather it refers to those who fail to relate themselves to God and to the work of Jesus Christ through acknowledging truth. God holds individuals responsible to act upon what knowledge they have, however incomplete. As they act on what they have, He provides more until they reach maturity in their relationship with Him. Ultimately human failure should be understood as an unwillingness to submit oneself to some germ of truth, that would ultimately have led to an understanding of the story of Jesus Christ Himself.

This failure to relate oneself to God is the sin that leads to all others and which God will avenge. The failure occurs within our minds at the time when the voice of one's conscience is suppressed. Such a person may never hear the story of Jesus Christ. But the truth is they removed themselves from the process of God by repeatedly rejecting this entry-level test of their inner desires. They have chosen a direction that their lives will then take. God's approach to humanity is individualized. He visits each person, His Spirit touching theirs. To resist at that moment of visitation is to reject this inner touch of God. It is the first cause of all moral failure. It leads to greater offenses and takes on many forms. It can appear as piety or as vileness and perversion. But underneath there is the common thread of an unwillingness to submit to the voice of truth.

It is not just for beings who owe their very existence and survival to their Creator to ignore that which He has made evident within them (Romans 1:19) and then to arrogantly rant against Him. He will avenge this offense against Him at an appointed time in His plan. That appointed time is called "the day of Yahweh."

1:9 "and these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power,"

In this verse Paul summarizes what the vengeance of God will involve. He says that such ones will "pay a judgment" or "pay a just penalty." The words used by Paul are the common expression of "a just penalty" in the Greek world. So the vengeance of God never becomes excessive so that it moves beyond justice as human revenge does at times. God's justice exacts the payment that true justice demands.

The just penalty is said to be "eternal destruction," in most of our English renderings. The term rendered eternal is an expression of something that is without beginning or without end or both. It comes as close to the idea of eternal as the Greek can put it, except for the seldom used word αἰδῖας. The word used here for destruction has a meaning that usually would not include taking away the existence of something. The next phrase in Paul's letter assigns and clarifies what this destruction is and the precise nature of the penalty these will pay.

The penalty of justice for those who choose to separate themselves from belief in Jesus Christ, will be separation from Him. They will exist away from His glorious power. Now we understand that nothing exists outside of His sustaining power, and

that only Yahweh has life in it of themselves. But these who are punished will never live in the full experience of the glory that creation had, the full revelation of God's power brought to bear on the experience of human life. The full revelation of God's power was originally displayed in His creation but became obscured and veiled by evil.

The reality of the present is that the glory of His power is still experienced by evil men. They participate in His faithfulness and His goodness even though they do not acknowledge it and they explain it away. They will have an existence in which it will be removed. The experience will reveal just how good God has been even to them. All the bantering about suffering in the present world will be silenced by the full understanding of what life is like when not influenced by His glorious power. Even death will be seen as a mercy, but it will not be attainable.

Now in the context of this letter, we must clarify that the beginning of the day of the Lord will not result in the wicked being assigned to hell. That will be their eventual lot. We assume that as the day of the Lord unfolds, they will experience physical death and enter the place of torment that has been the lot of the wicked since the fall of Adam. It is the place where they await resurrection and final judgment (Luke 16:19-31; Revelation 20:11-15).

So Christ's kingdom will be experienced on Earth by resurrected believers and by the millions that believe in Him and embrace Him at His appearing on earth. The rest will be assigned a lot of Paul speaks of here and be separated from Him as they themselves have chosen. There they will await their final sentencing.

1:10 "When he comes to be glorified in his Saints on that date, and to be marveled at among all who believed—for testimony to you was believed."

Those who do not believe will be removed so as not to experience the glory of Jesus' power. That was the teaching of the previous verse. They will not experience the reign of Christ on the earth when He is bodily present as Earth's King. They will not be part of the restoration of God's glory to the image of man.

On the other hand, Paul teaches here that we who have believed will experience all this. We are, in fact, central to that day and age. He has chosen to display His glory in us, even as it was in the initial creation of humanity. Part of the great work of God in the events surrounding the day of the Lord is the resurrection of the righteous dead, the lifting way from the earth of all living believers, and the transformation of the entire group of them altogether, so that they receive incorruptible, imperishable bodies. These all will return to Earth with Him, living proof of His power to act against the corruption of evil and to restore His glory to His creation.

We see in Scripture that when Jesus returns to earth visibly (Zechariah 12:10-11), many will come to believe in Him especially among ethnic Israelites. And so there will come to be on the earth in that moment a whole new people, all new believers who will be reigned by Christ and His vast company composed of people of faith from all ages. As the events of the day of the Lord begin, many will refuse to believe still. These will be taken away by physical death from the experience of this glorious power of Christ. But it will be the beginning of a great era both for those who reign with Christ and those new believers and their ensuing offspring who are the subjects of His reign on earth. It will be the golden era of the earth, though the seeds of evil remain and will sprout and bear fruit again (Revelation 20:7-10).

All who believe without seeing will marvel. The word marvel expresses the feeling of seeing or experiencing that which cannot be explained. Colloquial expressions like “it takes your breath away,” and words like “astounded,” or “dumbfounded” describe what will be the central feature of our lives when we are physically present with Jesus as we carry out His rule on earth. It will be a series of consecutive moments when we see in Him thought, power, character, knowledge, and more than simply leaves us lost for words. In scenes of Scripture that depict the place of God’s presence and the activity surrounding Him we see the continuous repetition of certain phrases (Revelation 4:8-11). That is a human response that comes when there is so much that defies expression. It is the ever-present response of those who experience life with an infinite being.

Paul weaves into this accounting an affirmation that this will be the personal experience of the Thessalonians. It is easy to lose sight of the glory of the era of Christ’s reign for us individually and personally. We analyze the truth and store it in our minds, and it sits there in storage somewhat distant and inactive. This is not just information about how history will be shaped and formed. It is our personal future, and experience that awaits all of us who believed the testimony of the apostles. We must stop and ponder this often and do so at an emotional level. It is inspiring and is liberating. It instills a hope in us that interprets and defines all over other experiences. It is the payoff. It must be an active piece of our mindset.

In this verse we see the tiny thing that separates two separate worlds of reality. One will be a world of lostness, of all that destroys and vexes the human spirit, more of the same emptiness of the present but to a far greater degree. It will be a place where the full experience of being lost is entered.

The other world will be one of glory, the weightiness of all that has been missing in being separated from our Creator. It will be the continual unfolding and celebration of the profound. The thing that separates the two worlds is belief in the gospel. That’s it! And so the rock upon which hope rests is found in the answer to the question posed by Christ, whom do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13-20). Belief is the camel going through the eye of the needle, the stone of stumbling that becomes our place of refuge. Belief has the potential to transform the present and future of every person.

1:11 To this end also we pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with“ power;”

Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians is a prayer for spiritual power. That much is certain in these words. He sees the necessity of God’s power to be extended to them if their desires for goodness and works of faith are to become a reality. Apart from God’s grace, our desires for such things are simply not strong enough. Our other desires will be the more influential and will be the ones that shape our lives. So our sanctification is as much a work of grace and faith as is our justification.

It does appear that this grace of God that empowers practical holiness and impact in ministry is resistible on our part, however one might view God’s grace in the matter of justification. It appears that grace acts to strengthen decisions that the Spirit inspires in us, but that these are decisions that we must execute and renew. The first cause of any goodness in us is always God and His grace. But the tone of this verse is that the Thessalonians maturity is not a foregone conclusion. It must be worked out and even fought for to some degree by them. The Spirit enables this fight, or there would be no fight. Paul’s letter will show that this fight will be won as they think rightly about some

things. They must think according to the pattern of life the apostles had both taught and modeled.

The prayer expresses the hope of Paul that God would consider them worthy. This can never be a reality apart from grace. Again, grace is always the first cause of all the good that comes to humans from God. But we do have the issue of stewardship taught in Scripture and clearly applied to the issue of our knowledge of truth (Luke 8:16-18; 11:31-36; Mark 4:23-25). Clearly, we receive more truth as we act faithfully on what truth God has given us. So we are counted worthy not by the absolute standard by which Christ is considered worthy. We are considered worthy because of faith; the degree of trust we place in the truth we know of God. Our trust is displayed as we make our life decisions according to His truth. When we make such truth-shaped decisions, we are blessed with more truth, and it is the truth that sets us free (John 8:31-32).

1:12 “in order that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The name of Jesus Christ is recognized throughout the world. He is glorified when He is trusted and when life is lived in submission to Him. And so this verse states the end to which Paul wanted the lives of his readers to point. When we submit to Jesus, we represent and proclaim him in a credible way. He can then be recognized for who He is by others.

At the same time, we are glorified in Him. Humanity is at their very best when they are living in faith. This is as good as it gets in the present creation. Through the grace of God and the acts of Jesus that flow out of His grace, we have been rejoined to God. When we live by the leading of the Spirit in us, we are living human life on its highest possible plane. And so we glorify Christ, making His reputation even better. At the same time, He glorifies us and enhances our reputation and our credibility. This is all according to Yahweh’s plan, exactly what He envisioned for humanity at creation.

2 Thessalonians 2

2:1 “now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him,”

Paul begins to speak to the matter that is his primary concern, the thing that appears to have led him to write this letter. He names the subject here the coming of the Lord and our gathering together to Him. There are many things about this subject that must inform our understanding of Paul's words here because what follows is not a comprehensive treatment of the subject. We must understand it in accordance with what has been revealed on the subject in the rest of Scripture. The Thessalonians had learned certain things from Paul (verse 7). We must interpret his words in this letter with some background information, things he had apparently already taught them.

They obviously had the first letter he had written and that is in our New Testament. We know they had that information. Before that letter it appears that they had not understood properly the timing of the resurrection of the dead in Christ. They were grieving excessively, thinking that the dead would miss out on the glory connected with Jesus' second coming to earth and His kingdom. So Paul informed them that at Christ's coming there would be a shout, the voice of the Archangel and the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ would be raised from the dead. Then those believers who were still alive would be lifted up from the earth gathered with the resurrected dead to meet Jesus Christ in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Elsewhere Paul teaches that all believers will be transformed in that moment receiving incorruptible bodies at that time (1 Corinthians 15:50-58). Paul associated this reunion with Christ of dead and living believers, with a trumpet blast (1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). In this second letter to the Thessalonians then, Paul wants to give them more information about this great “gathering together.”

This term (gathering together) is a noun that is used only one other place in the New Testament. It is used in Hebrews 10:25, where it speaks of the regular gathering of believers, what we know as the regular church gatherings for ministry to each other. The verb form appears 9 times in the New Testament. One of those usages of the verb appears in Matthew 24:31. That verse records this statement by Jesus, “and he will send forth his angels with a great trumpet, and they will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one corner of the earth to the other.”

That statement appears to be a restatement of the words of Isaiah, who spoke of a great trumpet being blown that would result in the gathering of Israelites to Jerusalem where they will worship Yahweh (Isaiah 27:12-13). This does not mean the two events are the same the gathering of believers to Christ and the gathering of Jews to Jerusalem. But looking at all the Bible's teachings on eschatology, it is not hard to see that the same trumpet blast that results in the gathering together of the dead and living believers to the Lord in the sky could also lead to the journeying of scattered Israelites to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh.

Two events are spoken of here to the Thessalonians. Christians have speculated for much of the 20th century on whether they are separated by time. That speculation will continue. But there are two ideas in the statement “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him.” The two are being addressed together and that certainly means that the coming and the gathering could occur in close proximity timewise. The words that follow and the other terms used by Paul speak to the

sequence of some of the great events associated with the coming of the Lord. In fact, we can see in the verse that follows that the timeframe and sequence of events that Scripture reveals as characteristic of this coming season were exactly what Paul was concerned with explaining to the Thessalonians. We will also see though the conversion and re-gathering of ethnic Israel on earth is not Paul's concern in this passage, though that could be an event that will unfold simultaneously.

2:2 “that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.”

We cannot know the exact nature of circumstances Paul is referring to here when he speaks of spirits, messages, and letters. But we can reconstruct the general scenario that explains these words. It is a very simple one that does not require too much speculation at all.

Paul's remarks would have to do with the timing of the Day of the Lord. As Paul begins to address this, he has mentioned three great occurrences so far in the first two verses of this chapter. There's the coming of Jesus Christ, the gathering together of those who have believed in him, and the arrival of the day of the Lord. The nature of each of these events is such that Christians should be looking forward to the era of their arrival.

But first we should note that the timing of the day of the Lord is what has come into question in the minds of the Thessalonians. The day of the Lord is the time appointed by God when he will confront evil on the earth in men and in the kingdoms of the earth. We find that it is an extended period marked by Yahweh's judgment and wrath. Isaiah's words were among the earliest to assure the existence of such a day in the plan of God (Isaiah 2:12-22).

This season of setting the world right begins to be referred to as the day of the Lord in the prophetic writings. There we learn that it involves cataclysmic upheaval in the natural order we observe on earth, as well as the political and the spiritual order of life on the planet (Joel 2:28-3:21). Though he did not use the term, Daniel spoke to the political impact of the kingdom that God Himself would set up on earth. He said it would bring an end to all others (Daniel 2:36-45; 7:1-28), including the last brutally wicked kingdom of man on earth. The day of the Lord became to the prophets the signal event in the demise of the ungodly and the restoration of the earth to the rule and standard of Yahweh's justice (Isaiah 13:6-13; Obadiah 15-17; Zephaniah 1:14-18; Zachariah 14:1-6).

Significantly, Jesus did not use the term “day of the Lord.” That is significant because if indeed He is the Christ as we believe, God's appointed ruler, then from His perspective and from that of the Old Testament the day of the Lord would be the day of His coming to earth to rule it and administer justice. And so though He did not use the term “the day of the Lord,” He did speak of his own coming to earth in power and great glory (Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27). This was the message he spoke to the high priest of the Jews in His final declaration of Himself (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62).

Jesus' coming would be marked by the same signs that the Old Testament writings ascribed to the coming of the day of the Lord (compare Isaiah 13:9-11; Joel 2:31 with Matthew 24:29; Mark 13; 24; Luke 21:25-28). This is not to say the coming of Christ and

the day of the Lord is the same event. But it is to say that the coming of Jesus Christ is a part of this greater event and so is preceded by some of the same signs and phenomena.

It appears then that the Thessalonians had been led by some to believe that the time for the day of the Lord, and hence the coming of Christ had arrived. Paul mentions three influences that had led them to embrace this idea. These are described by Paul as fraudulent influences that he wants to refute. The thing they had been led to believe was that the day of the Lord was at hand. In other words, the day of God's direct confrontation with evil, when He Himself would come to earth to confront evil had arrived. Literally Paul says, "it has come to stand." The Thessalonians were not just believing it was coming. It was!

The question has arisen in the mind of Christian thinkers as to what exactly marks the beginning of the day of the Lord. Is there a discernible, signal occurrence that says it has begun? Will the coming of Jesus Christ mark its beginning? And of even greater interest, will the resurrection of dead believers and the catching up, or rapture, of living believers spoken of by Paul in connection with Christ's coming, occur moments before or years before the judgment of the day of the Lord begins? Will we be with Him and miss events on earth in the days leading up to Christ's second coming? These are some of the questions that Paul's words in the coming verses will shed light on.

But for now, the question Paul is concerned with is a precise one. On this mid-first century date, had the day of the Lord come to be? In the language of Jesus, was the fig tree telling them that summer was near? (Matthew 24:32-33). Were world events as Jesus had predicted pointing to His coming being imminent? The Thessalonians were thinking so based on false, fraudulent information.

Now if we thought that in the next week, month, or year God's final judgment of earth would begin with its widespread destruction and that somewhere very early in that mix we would be snatched from the earth, how would we live our lives? We might be proclaiming a false alarm to unbelievers and so have the credibility of the gospel harmed. We might withdraw from normal activities essential to our survival (i.e., jobs and commerce). We might take strange courses in any leadership decisions we were involved in. These would all turn out to be a serious blunder if we were wrong. The Thessalonians were wrong. Paul saw the seriousness of it and so will give them information that will help them and us refute such a fraudulent line of thought.

2:3 "Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction."

The activities of spiritual beings, and the words and actions of fraudulent people always aim at deception. The result is always that many are being deceived about all sorts of important things. We must not let that happen. Our understanding of the Scripture first along with the spiritual discernment that grows out of that must be such that we are not led astray. The Spirit enables us to give attention to the Scripture along the way and to establish relationships with others who do so. Together we can plot a steady course. The Scriptures working in the larger community of the church are God's primary provisions for this challenge. These are the tools the Holy Spirit uses to shape us.

The things Paul is about to share in this letter were not new to the Thessalonians. They had heard them from Paul (verse 7). They are also all from the Scripture and from the words of Jesus. It is quite likely that the churches did not yet have the words of Jesus in writing. The first gospel, whether it was Matthew's or Mark's, was not widely circulated at the time Paul wrote this letter, even by the earliest estimates of their writing. So even if there were many Jews in the Church of Thessalonica and even if they had scrolls of the Old Testament writings and those in their number that were well versed in them, it is easy to imagine their need to give greater attention to and be instructed in the scriptural witness about the day of the Lord. So what follows is a summary of what is known from the prophets and Jesus about the timeline of events leading up to this epic event. There are things that will happen first before the day of the Lord. Its arrival is not without signs.

Paul states that the day of the Lord will not come, unless "the apostasy" comes first. The words "it will not," are added by the translators to provide an English equivalent to what Paul is saying. The actual Greek rendering is "because unless comes the apostasy first". So there is a desire on Paul's part to communicate that the day of the Lord could not have arrived, because there are some other things that must arrive first.

The first of these things that by God's plan arrive before the day of the Lord is "the apostasy." This noun occurs only one other time in the New Testament (Acts 21:21). It is a compound word composed of the word meaning "to stand," and the preposition meaning "away from." So it implies one who separates themselves. Its apparent meaning was a person or a movement that separated itself from the ordinarily accepted belief and practice of the truth. It is not just the normal failure due to the flesh or even negligence. It is a more intentional. It is a deliberate setting aside of truth and the setting of a different course. A related word is the word for divorce (Matthew 5:31; 19:7; Mark 10:4). The root word from which both divorce and apostasy come occurs fifteen times in the New Testament it means to depart physically (Luke 2:37), to lead away in rebellion (Acts 5:37), to leave someone alone (Acts 5:38), to stray from the faith (1 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 3:12), and to separate oneself from evil (1 Timothy 6:5; 2 Timothy 2:19). So we have a word in which the idea of separation is paramount. It is used of Paul by his enemies, specifically of Paul drawing away Jews from adherence to the Law of Moses (Acts 21:21). The Orthodox Jews were already viewing Christianity as an "apostasy." The question remains what was Paul referring to with his use of this term?

Some have seen this as a coming event in Christendom, a widespread straying away from the truth that we will see in the future. There is no doubt that this will happen. Jesus predicted it (Matthew 24:10-12; Luke 18:7-8), and Paul predicted it (1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 4:1-5). Is this the apostasy Paul is referring to? Or is that apostasy part of a greater one spoken of in Scripture?

The rest of the things mentioned by Paul that happen before the day of the Lord indicate that the apostasy, he is speaking of is one described to Daniel by a heavenly messenger (Daniel 10:14). In this act of revelation God gives Daniel information about the plan of God as it stands written in the archives of heaven (Daniel 10:21).

The words of this heavenly messenger to Daniel are recorded beginning in Daniel 10:10 and extending to the end of Daniel's writings (Daniel 12:13). That vision adds detail to an earlier one that speaks of the plan God had decreed with respect to Daniel's people, the Jews, and the holy city, Jerusalem (Daniel 9:24-27). This plan will be carried out in time during a period described as "seventy sevens" (Daniel 9:24). The

seventy “sevens” appear to involve three stages, the first seven of the seventy “sevens,” the next sixty two of the “sevens,” then the seventieth “seven.” The state of things in Israel and Jerusalem after the passing of sixty nine “sevens,” would be that the Messiah would have come and then have been “cut off.” Jerusalem at this point would be destroyed, the Temple destroyed, and Israel generally overrun. This desolation of Israel had been determined (Daniel 9:25).

The heavenly messenger tells Daniel that war would be the lot of Israel and Jerusalem “to the end”. There is in his words an unspecified period determined by God which would be tumultuous for Israel and Jerusalem. There is also a mention of a prince who is to come. The plan of God it seems, calls for a world ruler to rise among the non-Israelite people group, the same people group who would destroy the Temple and Jerusalem after the Messiah was “cut off.” The last seventy of the “seven”, the seventieth one, involve this ruler’s interactions with the Israelites and with Jerusalem.

According to the heavenly messenger, at the start of the seventieth “seven” this coming world leader will make a “firm covenant” with Israel. They will have a peaceful relationship with him for a portion of this seventieth “seven”. But in the middle of the “seven” he will abruptly turn on them and their religion. He will halt all sacrifice to Yahweh in the Temple that my now will have been rebuilt. He will become one who to them is characterized by abominations and who will bring about desolation. This would persist until the destruction of him decreed by God is carried out (Daniel 9:27).

Daniel 10:10–12:13 give added detail of events that would occur during these seventy “sevens” as well as added detail about how the great apostasy brought about by this ruler would be acted on by God. The passage describes several the political events that happened during the sixty nine “sevens.” The instruction given by the heavenly messenger does not reveal names and dates. It consists of a string of events with enough detail in them that those who observed them at the time could recognize them and so know that Yahweh’s plan was on course.

This heavenly messenger’s words are marked by something typical of God. He plans an event that creates a picture of a coming event. So for example, the serpent on the pole that the Israelites looked to for healing from a plague became a picture of Jesus being placed on a cross for forgiveness from sin (Numbers 21:8–9; John 3:14). In the heavenly messenger’s words to Daniel, we see a ruler that would rise during the sixty nine “sevens,” the period of time before the coming of Messiah. This ruler would be a picture of the ruler that would exist at the end, during the final “seven.” So many of the things this last great ruler would do would be done earlier by the first ruler as well.

From our perspective in the 21st century, we know the name of the first ruler that was a foretaste of the final ruler. He was Antiochus Epiphanies (175–164 BC). The words of the messenger described him, yet there is a certain amount of what can be best described as “surplus” in that description if it only speaks of Antiochus Epiphanies. The words describe something of a greater scale than that which can reasonably be attributed to Antiochus. So there is an overlap between the two and a merging of the acts of the two. What happened through Antiochus during this sixty ninth “seven” in Israel, would happen to an even greater and more dramatic degree during the seventieth “seven.” We could say that Antiochus was evil’s “serpent on the pole” that anticipated a final great evil kingdom the world would experience.

The specific passage that deals with these two rulers is found in Daniel 11:20–45. There are several important things that characterized both men. The characteristics were present in Antiochus and will be in full bloom in the ruler who is yet to come. The rule of both came about through intrigue and deception (Daniel 11:21). Both have their hearts set against “the holy covenant” (Daniel 11:28, 30). Both desecrate the Temple and abolish regular sacrifice (Daniel 11:31). Both befriend godless Israelites and turn them further away from Yahweh (Daniel 11:30–31). Both will be opposed by those who know Yahweh but will persecute and kill them (Daniel 11:32–35). Both will present themselves as God and demand worship (Daniel 11:36). Their resistance to and opposition to God will be unparalleled (Daniel 11:36–39). It is clear from these words that the regime pictured by the first ruler and completely carried out by the coming ruler will be an apostasy that is unique among all other apostasies.

When the disciples questioned Jesus about when Jerusalem would be destroyed, when He would return, and when the end of the age would come, he directed them to the testimony of Daniel. He was speaking after the time of Antioch Epiphanies. He specifically spoke of this coming ruler and his desecration of the Temple, citing Daniel’s testimony (Matthew 24:15). He mentions the preponderance of false prophets in the time leading up to this and the falling away of many (Matthew 24:11–12). Jesus saw a coming “apostasy” among both Israel and the church that would culminate in the worship of this coming apostasy. This is likely the apostasy Paul is referring to.

After speaking of this “turning away” Paul goes on to speak of the revelation of the ruler to come, calling him the “man of lawlessness.” How will we know that this great world ruler is this projected one? Many such rulers of come and gone. How will we know that this one is not just one more in the long line? He will be revealed, and he will be revealed through this sign that God has provided. He provided the sign to Daniel and affirmed it to us through Jesus. The sign is that this ruler will appear in the Temple and claim to be God. Paul will affirm that this is the unmistakable sign in the next verse. His point here is that this unveiling, this unmistakable sign would reveal that the day of the Lord is approaching.

The apostle John reveals that the spirit of lawlessness is already present and at work (1 John 4:1–6). For centuries, ever since Eden, we have seen a large element of humanity that wish to cast off all moral restraint (1 John 3:4). They want to write their own laws and moral codes that will benefit them. So this mentality has been present and will continue to be and will increase. This world ruler will personify that spirit and so be just what most of the world wants. In Jesus’ words on the times leading up to the end He uses the same word lawlessness and speaks of it as increasing (Matthew 24:12). This period of lawlessness will set the stage for this person who leads with no moral restraint (Daniel 11:36–38).

Paul adds further to his statement of this important sign that signals the approaching day of the Lord by calling this coming world ruler “the son of destruction.” Jesus used this term to describe Judas (John 17:12). This is a phrase that could be rendered “the son of THE destruction.” Like Judas, this future ruler will be the epitome of fallen humanity, the consummate evil that Satan can produce. In Revelation 9:11 we see that the angel who is king over the imprisoned demons, Satan himself, is named “the destroyer.” So this world ruler will serve as a sign that the day of the Lord is approaching quickly. He is closely aligned with Satan and is the work of him. The willing embrace of him by humanity, including the people of Israel, is the ultimate blasphemy against Yahweh. It will be evil in full-bloom in humanity, as full-bloom as the Creator will allow. The day of Yahweh will bring an end to this catastrophic moral decay on the earth.

2:4 “who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called God or object of worship, should he takes his seat in the Temple of God, displaying himself as being God.”

This is a key New Testament passage that deals with the last great world kingdom that arises before the great day of the Lord and His subduing of the earth for Himself. It harmonizes with the whole of Scripture’s testimony about the person that will lead this blasphemous era (Daniel 7:8, 21-28; 8:9-14, 23-27; 9:27; 11:36-12:4; Revelation 13). All of Scripture speaks with one voice concerning this individual’s brashness and arrogance. Paul adds to this witness his affirmation and the Holy Spirit’s that yes, this ruler is yet to come, and yes, he will present himself as God. Now many emperors have laid claim to being divine. But this will be different in that this person will claim to be greater than Yahweh by desecrating the temple of Yahweh and in that spot soliciting the worship of humanity.

This act, whatever it might involve, is what Daniel describes with words like abomination and desolation. (Daniel 9:27). It was foreshadowed by Antiochus Epiphanies who sacrificed a pig in the Temple. But when Christ came, He taught that this event as presented in the prophecy of Daniel, had not yet been fulfilled. He gave this as the signal event of a time of great tribulation as Satan and evil men make their play to rule the world and God begins to show his wrath towards them. Jesus proclaimed this desecration of the Temple still to come (Matthew 24:15-18), calling it the abomination of desolation. So appalling is this act that Daniel, when given glimpses of it, remains shaken for days (Daniel 7:28; 8:27). Therefore, Paul refers to the movement that produces this act simply as “the apostasy” in the previous verse. So brash and arrogant is it that it stands above all others.

This ruler will do things that no other ruler has done, making alterations in customs and laws that are staggering (Daniel 7:25). He will be ruthless in his opposition to God’s people (Daniel 7:21; Revelation 13:7). Through great deception and illusions created by demons and Satan, he will delude the world and they will join in worship of him (Revelation 8-18).

Though many have claimed to be gods, and though the human authors of Scripture wrote in eras when this was more common, they all agreed that this ruler will be unique in his brashly unholy stance toward Yahweh. It is this uniqueness that will enable the children of God to identify this person and so know the season they have entered (Matthew 24:32-33).

2:5 “do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?”

This is an important parenthetical notation by Paul. It tells us the importance he assigned to teaching about end times. It tells us that it was not easy to keep such things before the church so that they remained firm in them. We have no record of Paul spending any extended time in Thessalonica. The only visit recorded lasted a period of days or weeks, likely not months and certainly not years. There may have been other visits. But what we can say is that likely Paul had not been with them much yet had spoken of these things. Instruction about the teaching of Scripture on the day of the Lord should be viewed as essential. The present climate among the clergy of America on these matters is one of great apathy and ignorance.

If we do not speak of these things, it is not because God does not. We have significant space in Scripture devoted to them. It is not an easy matter to arrive at an understanding of eschatology. Scripture itself seems to allude to the considerable mystery that surrounds the subject, which makes understanding come only through diligence (Daniel 11:32-33; 12:3; Revelation 1:3; 13:18; 22:18-19). The option most naturally take of suggesting that knowledge of eschatology is elusive and therefore unknowable, and inessential makes for weakness in the body of Christ, the weakness Paul felt compelled to address.

2:6 and you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he may be revealed.

This is a curious verse about which much has been said and written. The Thessalonians, who did not know a great deal about the events of the last days, did know what restrained the man of lawlessness. We suppose ourselves to know much more about end times, yet we are not certain what Paul is referring to here. That is a curious thing!

Some have suggested that the thing which restrains the man of sin is the presence of the Holy Spirit to His church. From this point of view, it is when the church is raptured from the earth as taught in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, that the Holy Spirit's restraining influence will be removed, and the apostasy will run its course. Then the man of sin will be revealed, unbelievers will be deluded by his schemes, and the world plunged headlong into the evil it wants to be free to do. Those of this persuasion place the time of the rapture before the revealing of the man of sin.

Others suggest a less specific restraint, the normal restraint that has always curbed evil, the sovereign control of God. We know that evil does not run unrestrained by God. We catch glimpses of Satan needing God's permission to act (Job 1:6-2:8; Luke 22:31). We do not know the exact boundaries Satan functions in, but we do know that God has acted against evil beings to greatly confine their influence (Revelation 9:1-15). From this point of view God will remove restraints that He has placed on such beings in conjunction with the arrival of the day of the Lord. So the thing restraining the revelation of this Antichrist is the will of God.

It was seen that the first of these positions, that it is the Holy Spirit working through the church that restrains the revelation of the antichrist, makes the entire letter of 2 Thessalonians redundant. If the man of sin was not to be revealed until after the departure of believers, and if the day of the Lord does not come until after the revelation of the man of sin, then there would have been a very quick instruction for the developing Thessalonians error. Since they thought the day of the Lord was arriving, Paul could have simply said, "No, you won't be here for it." Or he could have said "no, since you are still here it isn't here!" Instead, Paul gives the visible sign of the error of the antichrist. Why would he give visible signs for that which people would not see?

It is argued by some that the Thessalonians were fearful that the promise of the rapture had failed, and so Paul is affirming here that if it had, then we would be expecting to see certain events as the day of the Lord approaches. But there is an absence of a clear statement that would say, "No, you have not missed it!" Assigning to the statement made in this verse this meaning, that the church will be removed allowing Satan to move in

to the moral vacuum, is an attempt to see a pre-tribulation rapture in the passage which teaches a pre-day-of-the-Lord rapture, one occurring after the man of sin is clearly revealed.

It seems best to view this statement of a restraining force as referring to God's sovereign will, plan, and action including the striving of His Spirit with man (Genesis 6:3). This all keeps the world functioning and preserves it from self-destruction. This restraint all happens because of God's great patience and his desire to draw many to Himself (2 Peter 3:8-9). So "that which restrains" is the sum of all God does to hold evil in check. Satan is always attempted to rule the world and always strives to do it. He will not be able to do so until he is permitted by God's plan.

2:7 for the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.

Satan has longed to subvert humanity and to enslave them to bring about his own purposes. So there are always among humans been Satanic conspiracies to rule the world and enslave its various peoples. There will always be such conspiracies to function outside the boundaries God has established, the desire to cast off all restraint. So there has always been turmoil in the affairs of the earth (Psalm 2:1-3).

Conflict between kingdoms, conflict with the forces of nature themselves, the elusive nature of peace on earth, all of this has been mysterious to humanity. They have proclaimed at various times the need for togetherness and pursued a golden age of their own making like an elusive dream. To them it is a great mystery this ongoing turmoil on the planet. But, the turmoil is nothing more than the mystery of lawlessness. It is the effect of sin and sinfulness, and it is far-reaching.

It is certain that even believers cannot comprehend this matter though they are closer than the unregenerate. Evil is a mystery, this lawless mentality that infects humanity and many beings in the spiritual realm. It is clearly at work shaping our experience of life, yet it does not destroy as it might because of the invisible actions of God against it.

Evil will rapidly run the destructive course to its full capability when God allows it to do so. The effects on the planet will be devastating. The result will be a time of unequaled tribulation and trouble on the earth (Daniel 12:1; Matthew 24:21). Revelation 6 gives a glimpse of conditions that will develop on Earth during the time of the great tribulation before the actual day of the Lord (Revelation 6:15-17). It is a horrifying scenario. It will develop at some point in time when God allows evil to run its course and its consequences begin to punish humanity.

It is a great mercy and blessing that God restrains lawlessness. Its destructive power is immense. Its power to blind is enormous, so that humans are unable to make the association between the pain in their lives and their insubordination to their Creator. This is perhaps the most mysterious part of evil, its capacity to impair judgment and our understanding of our own reality.

2:8 and then the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;

Yahweh revealed to Daniel that in the latter period of Gentile rule on the earth He Himself would set up a kingdom that would endure forever (Daniel 2:44). The imagery used by Him was of a stone, “cut without hands,” crushing the kingdoms of the earth, then becoming itself a large mountain that filled the whole earth. That is perfect imagery of Christ, the God-man, the one who is God’s appointed ruler over all that is (Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 28:18; Colossians 1:15-19; 2:10). The statement of Paul in this verse is speaking of the arrival of this anticipated kingdom on the earth.

Two unveilings are dealt with in this verse. The first is that of the world ruler, the lawless one. He is the epitome of the original sin, that act of Adam that brought to its full end. All that is evil in humanity and all that is evil in Satan are brought together in this ruler. So he is called the lawless one. We can understand him as lawlessness incarnate. That is why we refer to him as the antichrist. Christ was the word of God incarnate. This one is the incarnation of all that is against and opposed to that word of God.

The second unveiling is that of Jesus Christ. The one who appeared on earth as a servant and so died as our savior is unveiled as the Christ, the Anointed One. It will be revealed to all that He was who He claimed to be (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 23:69-70; 23:28-31; John 18:37). Revelation 19:11-21 is a further unveiling of this great confrontation between Jesus Christ and the forces of Antichrist. It will be a great battle, but a very one-sided affair.

Because He is God, Jesus words have unmitigated power. What He speaks comes to be and will stand. The imagery of the Revelation account is that of a sharp sword in Jesus’ mouth through which He devastates evil (Revelation 19:15). It is the power of His Word and the fact that all of nature response to His command that renders the forces of evil impotent. The power that spoke the world into existence can easily subdue the world and bring it into conformity with His plan.

It will be a short battle. Paul’s words pass quickly over it, which reflects the fact that the outcome was never in doubt. When the time arrives in the plan of God to intervene visibly in the affairs of the earth, it will not be a long-drawn-out affair. It will be decisive and speedy. In the mere presence of God power resides and is pictured as “consuming” all that is in front of Him (Psalm 97:3; Lamentations 2: 3). Here Paul notes that this despicable person will be killed by Jesus’ words and His mere presence. This power of the divine presence is such that the universe itself can be shaken by it (Revelation 20:11).

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

Satan’s specialty is deceit. He is adept at illusion and delusion. The man of lawlessness will be deluded himself and will be good as an illusionist because of Satan who empowers him. It appears from this verse that his entrance into the public eye will be marked by some spectacular things. Revelation speaks of a wound that this “beast” has, and that everyone is amazed that this fatal wound is healed (Revelation 13:3). What exactly this is referring to is mysterious, but there is something about this person that makes Earth’s inhabitants believe he is divine not human.

We can only imagine what tricks, what sleight-of-hand would be possible if one were to have assisting him a myriad of invisible beings. Even without such assistance it is possible to create incredible illusions so that entire audiences see something that they really do not see! Great illusionists have done this for centuries. Again, we can only imagine what is possible when God allows a fuller deception at the hands of Satan and his invisible beings. It is quite possible that this man of sin himself will be deluded so that he believes his own deity simply because of what he has witnessed himself do.

Paul speaks of things that will characterize the coming of this one. He opened the chapter speaking of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the previous sentence he has said that the men of lawlessness would be slain by Christ's word and by the epiphany of his coming.

The word "coming" is a noun that is formed from the participle form of a compound word. It is formed by prefixing the preposition meaning alongside to the word meaning "to stand". The word refers to the physical arrival of someone and the resultant presence. Paul uses it seven times in his two letters to the Thessalonians and the other six uses all refer to the coming of Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8). So this is an interesting use of language by Paul. He affirms by this that both persons will be present in the same way physically. Neither the truth of Christ's return nor the coming of the man of lawlessness is to be seen by us as some mere spiritual or allegorical presence.

This description by Paul of the coming of the man of lawlessness does not relate simply to this single event of his arrival. It refers to his *modus operandi* the things that will characterize his regime on the earth. We are told that his regime will be exactly what we would expect where the energizing of Satan is present.

The word "activity" is the rendering of the word we use of the Lord's empowerment in ministry (1 Corinthians 12:6). The idea is not just activity, but the energy that sustains the activity that is carried out. And this is where deception comes into play because the energy appears supernatural. We say "appears" because where deceit and illusion come into play it is possible there is no real power, just the illusion of it. Where Satan's power starts, and stops is a mystery to a large degree. And to a large degree it is a moot point since he can deceive and delude.

The things which will occur when this man of lawlessness is present are named by Paul as power and signs and false wonders. The wording in the original is interesting in that it gives emphasis to the word false or pseudo-. It literally reads "all power and signs and wonders false ones." Power and signs and wonders were what characterize the Holy Spirit's advent in the early church (Acts 2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3). They had characterized Paul's ministry (Romans 15:19; 2 Corinthians 12:1). They were seen as characteristic of God's coming intervention in the world (Acts 2:19) and were evident in the advent of Jesus and so evidence of His identity as the Son of God (Acts 2:22).

This is not lost on Satan. He knows the instincts and the thinking of humanity, and he knows what the Scriptures say. And so if he wishes to deceive humanity there must be at least the appearance of the miraculous. Paul's injection of the word "pseudo-" gives the proper way of understanding this satanic leaders' power and to a large extent the power of Satan. It is all based on appearance. Satan and his invisible hosts are experts at creating the appearance of great power. They will create the appearance of having given life to inanimate objects (Revelation 13:15). They will create the appearance that fire has fallen from heaven (Revelation 13:13). All of this can easily be accomplished when one has a host of invisible assistants. The relative power of all the personages

involved may be quite small. The invisibility of it all gives it a very powerful look. They're willing to use this "power" to kill those who oppose them (Revelation 13:7, 15). Through such intimidation they gain unprecedented control in the affairs of earth.

2:10 and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

This verse affirms the idea that the evil one's work is always characterized by deception. It also reflects the fact that wickedness, what we would call evil-as-a-lifestyle, is by nature deceptive. It has the capacity to blind those who choose it to the real nature of their deeds. So it is not at all uncommon for those living unrighteously to feel righteous and morally vindicated. Their moral heading becomes flip-flopped, and their convictions work against their spiritual health.

There is considerable evidence in the context that this coming era will be deceptive like no other. Wickedness will have even greater power to deceive, a power granted by God likely with the intent of waking up those slumbering to the urgency of their condition. This full deception of wickedness comes about through what the evil one is allowed to do, and what the fallenness of humanity naturally does enabling them to justify themselves and commend themselves and so increase their own blindness to truth. The result is pathetic and awful.

The last half of this verse speaks of the love of truth that can be received. What exactly this means is open to question. Some would say that this is received from God as a sovereign gift of His grace by those He has chosen. Other would say that this is an act of the human will. And so we come hard up against the question of the role of these two wills in contemplating the source of this love of truth that brings about salvation. Thus, it becomes an irresolvable issue in the intellectual arena.

From a practical point of view this argument can be allowed to run in the background, set aside in terms of strategy to reach others and in strategy to maintain one's own equilibrium. For example, in applying this to others, I have no way of knowing who God will impart the love of truth to, if indeed this is exclusively his action. Nor can I imagine him imparting the truth itself apart from human instruments like me. So I must present truth and allow those with this theoretical love of truth to emerge. And in myself I don't dare coast and allow myself to assume that I would naturally love only what is true and be drawn only to good deeds. Hopefully I know myself better than that! I must apply all diligence (2 Peter 1:5-9). So from a practical point of view, I'm left with this sobering thought; the love of truth is the single most important quality I can imagine having. However, it comes about in my life I must treasure it and guard it diligently.

From a more theological standpoint it seems we must at least acknowledge that God takes the initiative, the first step in this matter of imparting the love of truth. We are drawn to Him by a work that He does within us (John 6:35-45). Whatever steps we take from then on in our salvation process are possible because of that initiative which He took. That is the minimalist view of this matter of salvation.

Here Paul speaks of us receiving the love of truth. His use of the word “receive” might cause us to view this as referencing a sovereign act of God whereby we are made ready to love truth once we hear it by an act of the Holy Spirit. But the word “receive” is used throughout the Gospels for the idea of acceptance and belief (Luke 9:48; Matthew 10:40). Paul could simply be referring to that moment when we embrace the truth.

The terms love and hate are understood in the Biblical sense to involve choosing or not choosing (Romans 9:13). So Paul in this verse could be speaking of a sovereign act of God whereby certain people are given an innate love for the truth, i.e. to choose to follow it. This idea seems further supported by the fact that in the case of those who will follow the man of lawlessness, there is testimony of Scripture that they act as they do because their names are not written in the book of life (Revelation 13:8-10; 17:8). There is room in all such Scriptures however for us to understand the human role in a more determinative way, and thus the age-old argument between Calvinists and Armenians.

Much of our battle in the Christian experiences is to keep our own sense for what is true and not true, right and not right, on course with the testimony of God. This is called walking in the light. To the degree we see things as God sees them and love the truth enough to look through all the façades our own flesh seeks to erect, we will live wisely. To the degree we deceive ourselves we will be deluded and will prove ourselves fools. To eschew the truth damages our ability to recognize it and discern it in ourselves and others. The results are painful in the present and throughout eternity.

2:11 and for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false.

This is a sobering idea. God brings to light exactly who we are. He makes us an exhibit of who we are in our heart of hearts, which He knows. In those who respond to God’s revelation of truth, God exhibits His grace. They become exhibits of His power to make something of nothing. As someone denies the truth, they become exhibits of those who are deluded. They can speak eloquently of all they know and understand of life and truth, while being fools (Romans 1:18-32). They live life apart from wisdom and so become exhibits of foolishness. That is a work of God, something He is intentionally doing (1 Corinthians 1:18-31).

Here Paul speaks of the last great dramatic step God will take to prove the just nature of the judgment the day of the Lord will bring among humanity. There is the testimony of Scripture that sin has not run its course (Daniel 8:23; 9:24). By this God means it has not demonstrated its utterly ruinous and depraved nature. When the man of lawlessness is revealed the exhibit and demonstration of sin will be complete, so that the revelation of Jesus Christ and His judgment will be undeniably just.

The thing God will do through the man of lawlessness will be to send a deluding influence, literally “an energizing of delusion.” A fantasy or false hope can be a great motivator. The idea is that this delusional influence will be carried out by the evil one with God’s permission. The result will be a spiritual energy and power unique in the history of humanity.

This delusional influence is the thing God has restrained up until this moment in time. He will at the set time allow evil to come into a fuller bloom, though likely still restrained (Matthew 24:22). It will be devastating in terms of the cost in the personal lives of those who refuse to believe. It will devastate the normal way of life on this Earth, and it will devastate the planet itself. Were evil is allowed to run its course destruction comes in its wake. Evil and destruction are inseparable companions.

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

Here we have the purpose which all of this will serve. It will provide hard and tangible evidence by God's perfect standard of justice that His sentence against humanity is just and that His offer of salvation, extended for centuries, was the consummate act of mercy. We see in this statement reinforcement of the idea that God is bringing together exhibits of all that He has proclaimed true. These exhibits together will form a body of evidence that will testify for eternity regarding His character and greatness.

There is one important fact that this verse reflects. It begins with the little Greek word *ἵνα*, rendered by the English phrase in order that. That little phrase shows that God's judgment is not random or impulsive. The fuller revelation of evil and the fact that humanity is evil is required by God's own standard of justice. Judgment cannot come unless His own justice warrants it and unless His just mercy cannot in some way delay it. So the deluded regime that will close out the age of man will end with this lawless one bringing out the latent and camouflaged unbelief of humanity. It will also confirm for all the utter evil of Satan and his demons and confirm their hatred of humanity and God.

The truth that this last kingdom of man will affirm is the lack of desire in the hearts of most to embrace the truth. They simply do not want certain things to be true, like their own accountability before their Creator. So they substitute their own version of truth. The claim innate goodness in themselves and ultimate power in the creation itself. This is the delusion that leads to all others, and it occurs in the minds and hearts of millions in both the spiritual and physical world.

All will be judged by Yahweh, but first their conclusion that creation is better without God and their delusion that this is true will shape their existence for just a few short years. It is not that God will withdraw, or creation would self-destruct. He preserves order rather than chaos. But He will allow their choice of a leader as He did in Israel in the case of them having a king. The future world leader will not necessarily be the specific individual of their choice. But he will be one who manifested the ideology that resonates in them. This error will punish them. Then Yahweh their Creator will judge them because the reality of their evil will have been clearly evidenced. Their pleasure in evil will have been confirmed and clearly exhibited.

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

There are several passages in the New Testament in which the destiny of the wicked and that of the believers are placed in sharp contrast. We have seen the downward trajectory of the evil marked throughout this passage. There is the self-inflicted pain of

consequences ending with the judgment and condemnation of God. This has been the picture of the world's future that Paul has been developing.

Rather abruptly in this verse, he leaves this story of the disastrous end of the wicked to play in the background. He begins with the emphatic pronouncement, "but we ourselves should give thanks to God always for you." Almost in passing he calls his readers "beloved by the Lord." Whereas the unbelieving are eventually left to their own devices, believers have been loved by the Lord Jesus. For all who embrace the truth, Jesus' great act of love on the cross of Calvary becomes the atoning sacrifice for their sin. They have been loved by Him and so Paul chose grammar that names Jesus as the personal agent by which God's love is bestowed on us. So even if the statement ended here, there is a sharp contrast. The unbeliever faces condemnation, the believer commendation.

Paul then speaks to the fact that God has chosen us. This is of course a much-discussed idea among Christian thinkers. This passage has already alluded to this thought (2:10). The word Paul uses here is not the normal word for choosing that we see in the New Testament where what we have called the doctrine of election is being spoken of (Mark 13:20; John 15:19; Ephesians 1:4). There the word *εκλεγομαι* is the one generally used. The one used here is *ειλατο*, and it means something different. It means to take for oneself (Philippians 1:22; Hebrews 11:25). So the essential result in view is the same. But this word may emphasize a little more the simple act of choosing. The rest of the verse defines that action whereby this taking up for oneself became a reality. The same word is used in the Septuagint (Deuteronomy 26:18), for the choosing of Israel, where the result and vision God had for Israel is then expressed.

The primary expression however in this verse that makes it so different than what has been said about the world is a little phrase "unto salvation" (*εις σωτηριον*). This is the grand end toward which God has gathered a people "from the beginning". In every era He is had a people, and from every area they will one day be gathered together into one (2:1). The gathering together of this community of faith for good, for rescue, health, and wholeness (terms inherent in the word salvation), is the result His plan will bring about.

This salvation, the bringing of health and soundness to His people, comes about through two means that God energizes. First, there is the sanctification, or the setting apart done by His Spirit. This is both a onetime act that occurs when He indwells us, and an ongoing process He carries out as He speaks truth to us. The word sanctified belongs to the family of words to which the term holy belongs. This setting apart is the essential idea of holiness. It is a state of having been designated for a specific use, distinct and different from what would be normal. The Holy Spirit's presence is essential to this process in us, and this idea was made plain to God's people centuries before the actual baptism of the Spirit came about (Deuteronomy 29:4; 30:6; 5:29). The Christian experience is essentially one of listening for and discerning the promptings of the Holy Spirit, as opposed to the promptings of one's own instincts.

The second means by which we experience salvation is by means of faith. God's setting apart of us comes about as we trust in the truth as He has revealed it. If we place no confidence in that truth, then we are left to muddle along by whatever it is that we have placed confidence in. Our lives are shaped by whatever we believe is true.

Faith, and by that we mean trust, is required by God. He has so structured the spiritual realm that our senses cannot perceive it. We must embrace His existence, though we do not see Him and we must embrace His revelation, though there are ways to explain it away. Our experience of salvation depends on our exercising the faith which He Himself has enabled (Ephesians 2:8-9).

These two forces, that of the Holy Spirit working in us and that of our ever-growing trust combine to bring about both the life and destiny that we would otherwise not know.

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

The purpose of God with respect to our day-to-day lives in these bodies often consumes all the strength we have. But these things to Him are simply a means to get us to where He wants us for eternity. What we call heaven is what gives meaning to all that we do in this life. But in speaking of heaven, we are not speaking just of a place and its experiences, as we might Disneyworld or the like. We are speaking about gaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the high and lofty privilege that Yahweh has summoned us to.

This privilege comes to us through the gospel. The heart of the gospel is the death of Jesus as our sin bearer to atone for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-11). Paul speaks here of “our gospel” and this refers to his broader message about Jesus as the Christ of the Old Testament, the present Head of the church, and the coming King of the earth and all day-to-day implications of this truth (Romans 16:25-27; 1 Timothy 1:8-11). This message was delivered by Paul and the rest of the apostles to the church (Galatians 2:1-10). It remains the core and standard of truth that will lead us to the full experience of all what God has for us in this life and that which is to come.

Now, what is this “glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” that God wishes us to gain? It refers to Christ’s second coming to earth not as a servant but as King, not surrendering His rights for sinful man but enforcing them (Matthew 16:27; 24:30; 25:31). It refers to our being with Him for all of eternity. It includes a physical sight and experience that is overwhelming (9:28-36). Our present experience in Him, particularly our experience of Him as we unite with His church, is a glimpse of that glory (John 17:22). Ultimately our experience of His glory comes with our being physically with Him. This is His desire that He asked God to bring about (John 17:24).

Paul’s instructions to the Thessalonians have already spoken of the fact that when He returns the dead will be raised. His letter to the Corinthians described the fact that in that resurrection we will be given new bodies (1 Corinthians 15:51-58). So in that event we will physically participate in His glory in that our new bodies will be glorious (1 Corinthians 15:43). There will likely be a physical manifestation of His glory in this new body, such as there was in Him in His transfiguration. But even if there is no actual light emanating from our bodies, we know that we will be in bodies that are not weak and that do not bear the consequences of the fall. All believers will share in His glory physically.

There will also be shared glory in the sense of our sharing in His reign over the earth (Daniel 7:18; Matthew 25:34) and beyond. It appears from various statements in Scripture that the sharing of His kingdom will be a varied experience among

believers, based on their stewardship in their present life (Romans 8:17; 1 Peter 1:7; 4:13). Christ Himself presented participation in this kingdom this way (Matthew 24:45-51; 25; Luke 12:35-48; 19:11-27). He illustrated this idea through parables and stories so that His followers would embrace good stewardship and so increase their inheritance. So the “glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” is a reference to the personal reward that will be given by Him for faithfulness and for stewarding those things He entrusted to us in this life. We will realize this reward both in his kingdom on earth in our entire life with Him on the new earth.

God’s plan of salvation has been established and carried out with this in view. His desire is to rescue us by paying for our sin and reuniting our spirits with His own. Through that relationship He desires for us to know the truth and steward it well. In strengthening us to be stewards we see His desire that we inherit all that is His. This is His intent and His desire for His children.

2:15 so then brethren, stand firm and hold the traditions which we were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.

Earlier in the letter Paul expressed concern that the Thessalonians are not shaken from their composure by teaching other than what he himself had given them (2:2). He returns here to that concern. Having clarified the data regarding the various event’s that would precede the day of the Lord, he now urges these friends to use his teaching as a rule by which to judge all others they might hear. His words were to be their grid, their anchor and stability.

Paul uses two expressions in this verse to make this point. First, he says to stand firm in them. The word he uses for standing is a word that means to physically stand (Mark 11:25), or to stand in the metaphorical sense, meaning unchanging in the face of pressure, not wavering in character and reputation (Mark 11:25). Paul only uses this term in this metaphorical way. It becomes synonymous in his letters to the idea of firmness of mind and conviction (1 Corinthians 16:13; Galatians 5:1; Philippians 1:27; 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:8).

There are various figures used in Scripture for this idea. Jesus spoke of the house built on a rock as opposed to sand (Matthew 7:24-27). There is the picture of the soldier standing firm in battle (Ephesians 6:11). There is the picture of a tree or plant standing because it is rooted in the soil (Ephesians 3:17; Colossians 2:7). Then there’s the opposite picture of being on a wild sea where we are tossed to and fro by the ways of false teaching (Ephesians 4:14). So the concepts in this verse are spoken of often by various writers of the New Testament who go to considerable length to place pictures in our minds that will inspire steadiness in us.

The second expression Paul uses to call us to steadfastness is rendered in the NASB by the expressions “hold to.” This is a word used for the act of arresting someone (Mark 6:17; 14:46), or of taking them physically by the hand to lead them (Luke 8:54). It is used metaphorically of following a certain tradition (Mark 7:3), of being held by a certain perspective so as not to be able to see reality (Luke 24:16), of grabbing hold of someone because of gratitude (Acts 3:11), and of achieving or laying hold of some purpose or desire (Acts 27:13). In the matter of concern to Paul, the idea of keeping their beliefs within certain boundaries, the expression “hold to” describes a mental and emotional activity. It means not to allow oneself to drift into believing something that is contrary to what Paul and the other apostles taught. Holding on would stop this drift. It was not just remembering what had been taught. It was using this as the

standard by which all else would be judge, the lens through which all else would be viewed.

This is the task of every individual who embraces faith in Jesus Christ and is the charge of every generation of Christian leaders. The amazing thing has been that there has been mass failure in this by successive generations. Yet within each generation God has had a people and the faith has been preserved. The Holy Spirit has always moved, convicted, and drawn many people after the heart of God so that even if the main body faltered the truth had a voice. He has orchestrated revivals and awakenings and great missionary efforts and faithfully provided for each searching heart. The result has been eras and areas where truth was readily apparent, and eras and areas where it would scarcely be found. But it has survived assaults of every sort from within and without. It has moved ahead to be embraced in each generation. Holding to and standing firm remains the heart of what Christians do.

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

Paul gives a blessing here that expresses his burden for these believers. This prayer spreads over two verses. It begins with the statement of who God is and has been for us. He became a man, the man known to us as Jesus. Jesus was Yahweh, in human flesh. He was the Christ, the one anointed to rule creation, who Himself created it. He is the essence of God, made visible. He and God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are of the same essence though distinct persons, so that they think and behave toward humanity as one. Paul's language here reflects both their distinctness and their oneness by speaking of them separately in the first phrase and then singularly in the second phrase.

God has loved us. That is a truth with life-changing implications. It changes everything regarding how we normally conceive of God. This fact makes the rest of what we know about Him encouraging and hopeful. Otherwise, His power and justice would strike sheer terror in our hearts. That He loves us means these things are forces for our welfare not for His alone. To put it in human terms, His heart enters His dealings with humanity, not just laws and procedures that He rules by. Because of His love for us, He has dealt with us graciously. When we speak of grace, we mean favors He extends to us that we do not deserve. He does not deal with us as we deserve. If He did His justice would demand that He withdraw, and humanity would simply lapse into a spirit of endless self-destruction. Instead, we have from Him intervention and a plan for our rescue from this enormous evil that has infected and corrupted us and the rest of His creation.

Where there would have been dread and resignation, there is in the truth eternal comfort. Eternity looks different due to the love of God demonstrated in the sacrifice of Christ. There is resolution of the great dilemma of evil freely available to all who believe in the story of Jesus' coming to earth and His death in our place.

Where there would have been fear there is now hope. Where the thought of facing our Creator with no hope of resolution was hanging over us, there is now the freedom that can only come with the knowledge that matters are settled in our favor between us. It is a great hope. It is not a false one that proves hurtful to us in the end. It is legitimate and it is the hope of enormous good. All the goodness of God that we associate with being loved awaits us, and His omnipotence and sovereignty guarantee it will be as He intends and as He has promised.

The idea that we are loved, and the idea that this love drives God to behave with grace is our rock.

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

The truth is that God desires to constantly inspire every member of His family. He will make a difference in actions and words. The good hope He has given us will inspire good works and words in us as we ponder the truth of who He is and how He has embraced us and adopted us as His own.

The previous verse speaks about who God is. Who He is to us is a critical thing for us to be confident of. This is best grasped by us when we examine Him through the lens of love as He describes it. But even our own incomplete version of love is helpful. His love constantly inspires gracious actions toward us. It is why so much time has passed in human history without His judgment being carried out. This love and grace led Him to reveal His truth which then encourages us and brings us good hope.

In this verse Paul prays for the kind of personal experience of this that he knows God longs to have with each of us. It is one thing to think through the truth of God and by that process see reason to be encouraged. That is a significant thing every believer should do. It is even greater when that leads to moments when God Himself seems to tap us on the shoulder and remind us of these things in the heat of real-life. This is what He does. He personally visits us to strengthen us for different kinds of actions and words than would generally come to us. His vision for us is this, that we be so open to Him in the moment that He can personally touch and inspire us, and that we recognize those holy moments and let them shape us.

This is the life of faith that Paul lived and it was his vision to bring about this life in tens of thousands of people. The Thessalonians were facing some difficult challenges. There was in the events of their era and place, reason to be lax and lethargic. Paul's prayer is that there will be spring in their step. The final chapter in his letter to them will speak to some of the specific areas of their lives that Paul was concerned about.

2 Thessalonians 3

3:1 finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you.

The Thessalonians remain to this day an example of obedience and responsiveness to the message of Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:2-10; 2:13-14). Because of this Paul was confident in their perception of spiritual phenomena and of their ability to pray effectively. So he gives them a command here to pray for him and the company of those who worked with him.

Paul asked them to pray regarding the word of the Lord. This is a reference to the message that Christ brought to the earth about God. And because of who Jesus was, it is a message that was directly from God (John 8:26-47). The Christian message is the message of Jesus Christ. It is about who He is, about what He said, and about what He did. It is a message sent from God through Jesus Christ. The words that God used to reveal Himself became flesh and blood, a living breathing human being (John 1:14). The words were incarnated spoken out in the audible language of the man Jesus and demonstrated through His visible actions. The accuracy and authenticity of this message was assured because Jesus was God in visible, human form. This message was then entrusted to select men, Paul being one of them (1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Galatians 1:1; 2:1-10; Acts 9:1-22; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10; Titus 1:1-3). Paul always viewed his message as specific, that is, as a message that directed a specific set of beliefs and specific lifestyle (1 Timothy 4:11-16; Titus 1:5-16). It was not open ended in terms of what it defined and prescribed (2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:4, 14).

Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray that this message would spread rapidly. The word rendered “spread rapidly” is from *τρέχω*, which means to run. It is used in this plain figurative sense of that which makes good progress. Paul knew well the barriers that are routinely thrown up against the message of Jesus Christ by evil and by evil men. He was aware of the need for such spiritual weapons to be employed as prayer (2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Ephesians 6:10-20).

Paul also asked the Thessalonians to pray that this message might be “glorified”. This is a curious thing to say. We find that Jesus was “glorified” when God did through Him and in Him that which allowed Him to be seen for who He was (John 11:4; 12:23; Acts 3:13). The message of Christ is glorified in much the same way, as it accomplishes a divine work in the hearers. It is glorified when it is accepted as of God and allowed to transform. In this way it had been glorified in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:13-14). Paul desired this to be the norm and marshals the prayers of those in whom the word of the Lord had been glorified to this end.

3:2 and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.

After praying for the progress of the message, Paul asked that he and those proclaiming the message with him might be prayed for. The request is specific and addresses the scenario that seemed always to develop around Paul. It seemed that wherever he went he encountered injurious and evil people that caused him great trouble. The word rendered “perverse” is the word for place, with a privative prefixed to it. This convey the idea of that which is out of place, or which has no place. It is used only three other times in the New Testament. On two of those instances, it is a term for criminal behavior (Luke 23:41; Acts 25:5). In the other instance it refers to

injurious consequences appropriate to a criminal act (Acts 28:6). Two of the three usages involved the suspicions and accusations that seemed to dog Paul. The reality was that the only criminal and injurious behavior that had no place was being done by his accusers, whom Paul also refers to as evil.

They were a curious group, of the same sort that conspired against Jesus. They trafficked in religion and in the Law. Yet they were always resisting God. That is a terrible place that the flesh leads people to. To be living aesthetically and denying one's desires and doing it in a way that alienated them from God. How curious a choice! How much better just to engage sin's permissive, licentious side! But these legalists were as Jesus said, white-washed tombs (Matthew 23). By human definition they appeared godly. But they were resisting all that God wanted to bring about.

Paul captures the state of their spirituality with these two negative words perverse and evil. Then more precisely he zeroes in on the essence of the difference between himself, a Jew himself and these Jews. They did not have faith. Thus, he aligns them with the wilderness generation Moses sought to lead, with all who kill the prophets, and with those who killed Jesus. This was the normal analysis of all the New Testament writers as they surveyed the spiritual course of many in Israel's history (Hebrews 4:1-13). It agreed absolutely with Yahweh's analysis of them as He faithfully reported to Israel through the Old Testament prophets. Faith was what separated the faithful from the unfaithful.

If all this seems too simple, it is. But it isn't. An inability to trust is a consequence of sin in humanity and so has been the reality since Adam and Eve and Abel and Cain. It has led to diverse streams of motivation and destiny in the story of the Creator and His creation.

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

Faith is not common in humanity. It is contrary to our fleshly instincts to walk by faith rather than by sight. And so humanity is generally unfaithful with respect to the truth. God on the other hand, is truth, and so He is always faithful with respect to it. While that which is true is outside of us and contrary to us, it is that which God is by nature and essence. So He is faithful to who He is. It is good that He is faithful to who is, only because He is good.

Fallen humanity, apart from faith and all else that the work of God brings about in us, is faithful to all they are as fallen human beings. So they are fleshly and self-obsessed. The result is evil people shaped by the deception of the evil one, capable of bringing great harm and pain to each other. That the world is not worse is attributable only to the faithfulness of God as one who is gracious and merciful. This faithfulness is experienced by all His creation, even the evil one Himself.

People of faith/trust are objects of God's special care and concern. Again, this is because of who He is. It is also because of who we are to Him. We are His. He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13). Paul says that the special care of God brings a strengthening to us. A form of the word Paul uses for "strengthen," *στηριξει*, is used to describe Jesus' resolute behavior in heading toward Jerusalem even though He knew a cross awaited Him there (Luke 9:51). It is used with respect to realities God has established and fixed as unalterable (Luke 16:26). So we are reminded throughout the writings of the New Testament to summon strength to do our part in this work of God (James 5:8; Revelation 3:2). We are also reminded that He wishes to do this work in us

(1 Thessalonians 4:12-13; 1 Peter 5:10). It is a work we are to help bring about in each other (Luke 22:32; 1 Thessalonians 3:2). Στεριξαι is derived from the word that means to “stand,” ιστημι, which metaphorically refers to that which is founded and secure as opposed to that which can be moved and swept away. Paul has already used this word and referred to this work of God in us (2:17).

This word captures the result of all that God originates and allows in our life. It is stability. Stability is important to reflect on and embrace because many of life’s events rock and shape our world as they arrive. It is in such things that God acts if we turn to Him, so that we become more stable, firm, and grounded. God and what He has made known to us about Himself should be where we turn our minds for the lens through which we view events.

Paul’s blessing/prayer includes the idea that God will protect us from the evil one. The word for protect when used literally means to guard, as one would a prisoner (Acts 12:4), or a treasure (Luke 11:21). It is used figuratively of holding oneself to a moral standard (Acts 21:24-25). It is used of God’s saving Noah from His judgment of the world (2 Peter 2:5). These ideas can lead us to think that the evil one and all he orchestrates cannot affect us, yet we know that it can and does. We all experience trouble, persecution, sickness, weakness, and death.

So what is it in this truth of God’s protection that we can allow ourselves to be comforted by? It seems obvious that God allows Satan and evil to work and attack. He does not give unrestrained freedom however to these. This is the first thing we must remember and think regarding Yahweh’s protection. He is sovereign. The second thing to remember is that in His sovereign plan and with His unequalled power He will act against every evil and every evil being in His time. It is action that will not just neutralize evil. It will transform its intended outcome to that which brings glory to Him and salvation to us.

When we are told by God that we are protected by Him it means that we are His. He has acted based on His intimate knowledge of the future, including His complete knowledge of all that evil will do and produce. His action was to put in motion a series of actions of His own that will bring about a reality that will clearly and irrefutably affirm His goodness and sovereign power. That means that His plan must deliver unmitigated good to His children. And that is the outcome that will come to us (Ephesians 2:7; Revelation 21:7-8; 22:1-5, 14). When His reward is given to us, we will say that though evil was intended, it worked out for our good.

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

When Paul says he has confidence in the Lord, he could be saying that through the Lord he had this confidence. He could also be saying that in the presence of the Lord and under His influence he had confidence in the Thessalonians. Or, he could be saying that he had confidence in the Lord’s strengthening and protecting them in the maturation process. The latter is likely his thought here, given what he has said in the previous verse.

Over long distances in an era of very slow communication, Paul’s ability to rest in the Lord and not obsess about people’s spiritual health was highly developed. It was not that he was never anxious (1 Thessalonians 3:1, 5). But likely the continual wrestling and prayer for people’s faith had created a certain endurance in him in these matters.

The tenses of the verbs Paul use help us understand the dynamics of this expression. He uses a perfect tense first, indicating that he has become convinced in the Lord concerning them, and he has remained confident. He describes their current state with a present tense verb. It speaks of action in progress. They were obeying and following the order that Paul set forth. Then he uses a future tense of the same verb to speak of the course of behavior he was anticipating. So his thought about the Thessalonians reaches both back and forward from the present.

The bottom line is that the Thessalonians had a track record of faithfulness to the truth. This gives a prospect for the future that is promising. The future is shaped somewhat by the past, but its prospect is only seized in the present as it arrives.

3:5 and may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

The English word “may” used by NASB reflects the usage by Paul of the optative mood in his use of the verb rendered “direct.” The optative mood is relatively uncommon in the New Testament. It is used to express the wish or prayer of one person for another. This was Paul’s prayer, hope, and dream for the Thessalonians. He was confident in the Lord’s desire for them. But they would play a role in the shaping of their future even as we all do. Our theology of God and our confidence in Him shapes our confidence in final outcomes. But intermediate stops along the path of this life bear an impress of evil, our own and that of the world. We are directed to the extent that we are teachable. And so, the optative mood appears in the letters of Paul at certain times (see Romans 6:2; 7:7). The word “may” is legitimate. This is not a statement of what will happen. It is a statement of Paul’s desire and vision for these believers.

This verse can also legitimately be seen as the potential of every believer in every place in all eras. It is a statement of where we will go under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Grammatically speaking it is a statement of desired result.

It is characteristic of God that He initiates and carries on work in our hearts. The heart is the seat of our problems. It also is the seat of our potential once we have learned well from the Holy Spirit. The hearts of people are the continual burden of Jesus.

Paul speaks of our Lord directing our hearts in such a way that two results come about.

The first of these two results is the love of God. This little phrase could be taken as meaning either the love which has its source in God, or the love which has as its object God. To view it as a statement of source would make the whole statement somewhat redundant, since it has already been clear that God is the source of this work that is going on. It is likely a statement of who is to be the object of our love. Loving God is the greatest commandment, the entire will of God for us wrapped into one idea. It is what had been promised under the old covenant, this new covenant in which God would write his Law on our hearts (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:33-34). It would be difficult to over-state the significance of this expression by Paul. He makes clear to us that we have the Lord, which in the mind of Paul would be Jesus Christ who perfectly lived out love for God, directing our hearts in that which He Himself did.

The second of these two results that Christ is orchestrating in us through the Holy Spirit is the steadfastness of Christ. That which He Himself modeled to his final breath; He seeks to bring about in us. This steadfastness, or literally obedience, is that which faith and trust should bring about (Romans 1:5). It is a remarkable characteristic because it is not obedience by rote or routine. It is not that obedience of normal human religious practice that springs from fear or superstition. It is a myriad of practical choices made due to our trusting Yahweh as the good and powerful God who has sovereignly extended His power and who is bringing all things into conformity with His justice. It is the continual casting of ourselves on Him as the righteous judge. It is a pattern of such obedience. It is a course that shows no visible sign of wavering, though faith is by its nature is an ongoing reckoning with all but may appear true. The course Jesus leads us to follow emerges out of our own Gethsemane moments when He helps us conquer apprehension and fear.

We can summarize this verse by saying that it merges grand themes and promises of Scripture with practical life during the Christian era. It is a vision statement for each believer and a mission statement for all who would engage themselves in what God is doing. It sets the tone for a series of difficult statements that Paul now must make about the practical matters of money and work.

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

Having just stated the direction of the Lord is seeking to direct us in, Paul turns quickly to our responsibility toward those who are not taking their direction from the Lord. Such error can and must be discerned through comparing their pattern of behavior to that which the apostles set forth.

The “tradition” the apostles had set forth is being contrasted here to unruliness. The word rendered “unruly” is ἀτακτως. It is the word τασσω with a privative prefixed. Some English symptoms for τασσω are to appoint, determine, ordain, set. So with the primitive prefixed the word unruly is a great rendition. It speaks as Paul intended to a condition where an expected order is not visible.

What was increasingly being called by this time in the mid-first century the Christian faith, always involved a certain way of living. It was not just a way of viewing God or Jesus. There was not just following the personal urges one had and assuming these were of the Spirit. It was a pattern of morality and values taught by Moses, by Jesus Christ, and by the apostles. Its message was that when God was in the midst of something, it looked a certain way. Yahweh brought a certain order where He was being consulted and obeyed. This order is what Paul is arguing for here. The pattern of life taught by the apostles was to be insisted on in the churches. The verses that follow will show that it was not just a way of believing. It was that, but it was a way of approaching things like work and money, that such beliefs shaped.

So important is this pattern of life, this orderliness or tradition, that Paul commanded that we “keep aloof” from those you do not follow it. The phrase “keep aloof” sounds like snootiness, a kind of arrogance. The Greek word means to set fast. It is an infinitive in the middle voice. The idea would be to set oneself firmly in the tradition of the apostles, separated from the dis-orderliness of the unruly. So there is a disassociation definitely in mind here, but not an arrogance or an aloof, mean-spirited, collective ganging-up on the person. There is a firmness and even a drawing of lines and definite

unwillingness to compromise or water-down the normal expectation. Paul uses a strong word, but a word that fits with our overall understanding of how God deals with individuals. It can be imagined in what we understand as “tough love”.

3:7 for yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined matter among you.

Paul has not yet described the nature of the disorderliness he is concerned with. He alluded to it by speaking in detail of his own example in verses eight and nine. He will state it specifically in verse eleven. It was that there were some of the Thessalonians that were not earning a living and so they were dependent on others to meet their financial needs. It is this that Paul is calling disorderly.

Paul leads strong in addressing this problem and can do so because of the way he himself lived while in Thessalonica. That is always how a leader must view spiritual leadership. It begins with a determination to provide a model through one's own actions for those who are to be influenced. That foundational work must be approached in a painstaking way. Leadership is not just providing a model, but it is enabled to a large extent by how well that is done. Paul calls the Thessalonians back to “mimicking” him.

We have no way of knowing without further research how extensive this problem was in the culture of the Mediterranean world. Paul felt the need to offer the gospel free of charge by engaging in the work of tent-making while establishing churches (1 Corinthians 9). Though he did not always do this, it seems to have been the approach he often chose. At least in this case this example was critical to the maturing of the local church. It may be that it was so in the Gentile cultures in general. What we may be seeing here is that Paul saw modeling productive work as an important tactic in the establishment of strong Gentile churches.

A well-ordered organization cannot come about where there is no fiscal responsibility. While God can lead us into circumstances that bring poverty, He does not lead us into irresponsibility. We are to provide for our needs and those we are responsible for, and we are to live within our means. The order Paul is advocating is that simple. The orderliness of Christianity extends beyond the more classic moral matters and beyond practicing Christian activity.

The Thessalonians knew all these things. Paul's language is emphatic in reminding them that they themselves know that they are to mimic the pattern they saw in Paul and his company

3:8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you;

Paul describes the lengths he and his company went to set an example for the Thessalonians in this area of their lives. They were careful to avoid creating any expense for anyone. There are two phrases that bring this out. First, they paid for the food they ate. Literally, they did not eat bread as a gratuity. The word used by Paul is the same word used to describe the free nature of justification. It comes from the word for a gift, specifically a sacrifice. So he did not demand from the Thessalonians a sacrifice so that he himself did not have to work. Second, he was not a burden to them. That word means “to be heavy upon.” It was used especially of that which encumbered financially. It spoke of severity and overcharge.

Paul also states twice the burden of the work he bore to keep from being a burden to them. First, he uses two words together, labor and hardship, to describe what it took on his part to set the example he did. The term labor comes from the word κοπῶ, which meant “to chop,” and was used of beating the breast in grief. This word Paul uses describes trouble painful work. The term hardship is a word that describes what is painful. So in both words we see the idea of unpleasant pain.

Paul probably wishes to drive home the fact that he recognizes that there is mundane routine involved in earning a living that we must endure. The relentless demand of life will often put before us work that we really do not want to do. The work associated with ministry was much more appealing to Paul, just as “fellowship” was much more appealing to the Thessalonians, as we will see in verse 11. There is a “grind” God calls us to faithfully carry out in this world. Part of the fallen nature of the present creation is that it has become unfruitful. Our labor does not pay like it should.

Paul adds to these expressions later in the verse the second expression already spoken to. It indicates indirectly this sacrifice he made to give them a model. He says he did not want to “burden” them. The word is formed from the word for “heavy” with the preposition “upon” prefixed to it. So the idea is that Paul worked so as not to add to the weight the people of Thessalonica were themselves bearing.

The tasks of ministries require effort and work. But to go beyond and provide a model for people requires great sacrifice. We have no choice in this. Ministry as Christ would do it requires that we rise to that which we can call others to mimic.

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

In all of Paul’s writings he affirms the right of those who minister the gospel to be paid by those they are ministering to, and that this practice was of the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:14). This normal practice is what he is referring to here. The phrase he uses reads “not because we do not have authority.” So a much more natural expectation would have been for Paul not to earn a livelihood apart from the ministry. It would have been fair and right in God’s eyes for the Thessalonians to accept the added responsibility of paying Paul.

Here Paul states his sole motivation for the choice he made to not take pay for his work. It was to provide the Thessalonians with an example. Paul may have seen in the entire gentile culture of his day that being industrious and engaging hard work were not values. It is certain that Paul felt the model was lacking at least in Thessalonica, that much is evident. This may have been the reason that he adopted the philosophy he did of engaging in business while spreading the gospel. Again, Christ-like ministry entails providing a model, which always demands additional sacrifice. That work involves going beyond what is normal just to make a statement.

Paul’s work that he engaged in was tent making (Acts 18:3). This no doubt involved patterns, whether actual material ones or mental ones. So it was natural for Paul to think of patterns when the parallels between his vocational work and his work in ministry. He uses the word for pattern to describe what he left behind in Thessalonica for them through his own sacrifice. Their responsibility in their faith was now quite simply follow the pattern. That is essentially why the faith came to be known as Christianity, because it is knowing and following the pattern given by God incarnate Jesus Christ.

3:10 for even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat.

The pattern set forth as normative by this date in the first century and the Christian community was not the same as what is described in Acts during the early days of the expanded presence of the Holy Spirit. Early on there were people sharing meals and material things, selling property to share with all that may have had need (Acts 4:32-37).

By comparison, this teaching of Paul seems cut and dried. However, it is easy to see how the mode of the church experience in Acts was destined to pass. In that model the time will eventually come when resource runs out if no one is producing it. Assets will eventually dwindle to nothing if enough time passes. The entire planet would be lost were this to become the accepted norm. There is no doubt that in creation the planet was more self-sustaining. But to a significant degree evil marred it so that labor of the painful kind was required of humanity from that day forward just to eat (Genesis 3:19).

Wherever Christians have misappropriated the truth of Christ's return, there is also a lapse in their urgency regarding their own livelihood. We must be constantly on guard in this area. We are to be looking for the Lord's return and expecting it. But we are not to let go of our responsibilities in doing so. There was likely some misguided thinking in the era of Acts that the apostles themselves had to learn from. These words of Paul were likely the product of those apostles being part of the experience recorded in Acts. We know that in Thessalonica they were thinking wrongly about Christ's return. That is the reason for this letter. We suspect that this led to the problem Paul addresses with this rather curt command.

This teaching represents the tradition Paul was passing on early. It is made clear in his words that this was not new teaching to the Thessalonians. It was part of the pattern Paul had laid down for them initially. The principal undergirding it is that we seek gainful employment, meet our own needs, and give for the good of the mission to those in need.

This principle was critical enough that Paul makes the black-and-white statement he does here. It refers to a pattern of living. It does not dictate that Christians do not care for those who are hungry or destitute. It does require tough love within the Christian community. We must hold accountable any who do not work to provide for their own needs. We are not to rescue them from consequences.

We are left to ponder why when the church started the Holy Spirit moved among the believers to do something seemingly so different. We can only speculate on this. The truth is that God seems to work in patterned ways and at times and seasons outside those patterns. We must also allow that we know little of how extensive the communal kind of experience in the early chapters of Acts became. Luke mentions it without speaking of the people's habits about work and commerce.

Another factor in God's work that may figure into these contrasting pictures of the early church is how He develops us. He teaches us some things directly and reveals His heart in them. But other things He leaves us to discern and give leadership to. It could be the leaders had to learn and develop these principles that by observation and experience and through the application of Scripture. Perhaps these principles were being formed by the Spirit during the short era described by Luke in Acts. However, it all unfolded, we find Paul affirming the principle of gainful employment (1 Timothy 5:8), solidly linking it to the practice of the Christian faith.

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

Paul uses the term disorderly for the third time in this context (see verses six and seven), rendered here undisciplined. Here he goes from the general principle he has given to specifically naming this as a problem in the Thessalonian church. He also solidly links disorderly or unruly to not being gainfully employed. It was a lifestyle that was unstructured and impulsive, rather than purposeful. The net result was that it had the same net effect as did the lifestyle of a reveler or a drunkard.

Paul's confrontation of this problem becomes quite emphatic in the second half of the verse with the wordplay he incorporates. A literal English version of this statement would be: "not working but working around." The term working around, rendered "busybodies" in the NASB, was formed by joining the word for work with the preposition around. A contemporary English term that might capture its meaning would be the word "dabble." One who dabbles does a little of this and that, but not much of anything. They are in the middle of things for various motives, but don't really accomplish much. Paul ties the word to activity of gossiping elsewhere (1 Timothy 5:13). Luke calls people dabblers who are experimenting with magic and curious arts (Acts 19:19). So it is not a term that describes anything desirable. It describes one who flits about, always in the mix of things that are troublesome and unhealthy. It implies instability, instigation, and agitation. No church needs this. No Christian who allows themselves to slip into it is being so led by the Holy Spirit.

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

Paul gives a very urgent tone to his words here now that he has stated the problem. He does so through the two words command and exhort. There is overlap in the meaning of the two words. Together they cover the full gamut of approaches to correct behavior. There is the use of relational equity, the affectionate appeal to reason. There is also the use of authority, a command from an officer in the church and the commissioned spokesman for the Lord to the church. It is both friendly advice and a rule of behavior that will be inspected.

Paul calls them to work in a quiet fashion. The word quiet is a relatively rare word in the New Testament, best understood from its use in Acts 22:2. There an unruly mob confronting Paul becomes "quiet". The idea is not just silence. The word speaks of the subsiding of agitation, unruliness, and movement. Whereas the term "work around" in the previous verse described the Thessalonians instability, this term describes focus. Paul is calling those who were flitting about, to intentional, scheduled, structured, focused, productive work.

Paul commands them to eat their own bread. They had a habit of being in other people's home at mealtime. They were taking bread from others to eat. They were abusing the legitimate practice of hospitality. It had become a means by which they could indulge their own flesh.

Christianity has had this difficult situation to cope with over the years. It is attractive to those who wish to be idle, who want an existence in which they do not have to bear specific responsibility. No local church or Christian to ministry is aided by such people. They must be called up from their flesh in this.

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

Paula's been talking about those who have been living in a way that was not honoring to Jesus Christ. He turns now to those with good hearts. In any church there are both kinds of lives being lived and there are surprises about who shifts to which side of the line. But we must be careful to not only teach against certain things, but to teach for others. That is a critical part of any good teaching ministry.

Paul says simply to the faithful ones, "do not grow weary of doing good." The pursuit of what is good should be understood generally as obeying the will of God for that moment. Ultimately that is what defines it. But most of the time that comes down to doing the kinds of things that we all recognize as good. Things like friendliness, encouraging words, willingness to serve, should be very visible among us. In the context, being gainfully employed would be part of this. It has always involved some measure of drudgery. But it is the pattern set forth by God.

If these kinds of things are part of our mindset, we will be positioned to repeatedly do good. We must not make this life too mystical. It is a matter of being in touch with God, but it is also a matter of adopting a demeanor and mindset toward other people and toward life in general. If we have ourselves in that mindset with the Spirit's help, God will surely bring us to what He has for us in a moment.

We can grow weary in doing good. Long hours cause physical fatigue even in good work! Fatigue can cause us to be self-centered. So we can have a weariness of people and find ourselves believing we cannot do one more act of sacrifice. Paul is likely referring to the fact that we can grow weary if we are doing good and expecting something in return for it. Goodness is always rewarded by God and that is the only reward we should seek (Matthew 6:1-18; 10:41; Luke 6:32-35). Goodness done toward those who cannot repay should be invigorating to us.

3:14 if anyone does not obey our instructions in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame.

Paul has a very clear expectation regarding his letters and that was that they be regarded as the rule people would live by and by which the churches would function. All the apostles viewed this as how the Spirit was working as He established the church. Their words were to be regarded as uniquely authoritative. Nothing less was acceptable.

This was not born out of some egotistical need on their part. It was the plan of God conveyed through the order and teachings of Jesus Christ and was the specific direction He gave to them (Matthew 16:19). This authority of the apostles would continue to reside in the church's teaching that these chosen men laid down and

established in it (Matthew 18:18). It is the basis for the acceptance of the New Testament which, added to the Old Testament, became our standard for judging all else.

Two phrases in this verse are telling us to have a certain mindset toward those who do not conform to Paul's words. What exactly are these two phrases calling us to do in terms of our posture toward the disobedient? What does it mean to "not associate with him" and what is the objective expressed by the words "that he may be put to shame".

The word rendered "associate" means to mix together with. It is used by Paul in his instructions to the Corinthians clarified in 1 Corinthians 5:9, 11. In that text, which is a clarification of a previous letter which is lost, the phrase "not even to eat with such a one" helps us understand what Paul is calling for. He is calling for clear separation from them. There's to be a clear message sent to them that they are not in the path with those who are following Christ. This starts with those closest to them who most make a definitive, loving statement to them, outlined best in Matthew 18:15-20.

It is important to note that meanness is not called for by the Scripture. Firmness is. Very often when humans summon the ability to be firm, they end up being mean. We must guard against this.

This "disassociation" could cover a broad range of actions, from formal church discipline to a friendly chat. The idea is to articulate a point of separation. A person who disobeys apostolic instruction must understand that they will do so alone, apart from the community of believers.

The second idea relates to the goal stated by Paul of putting such a person to shame. The meaning of the Greek word Paul used is "to invert." It is not an easy idea to capture in the English language. Repentance or change of mind is the end in view. When the word occurs in the Greek New Testament it is most often rendered by the word revere or reverence. So here it refers to bringing someone to point where they have appropriate reverence for the teaching of the apostles and so conform to it. Shame, in and of itself, is not the goal. But that emotion often accompanies the moment when a person's viewpoint is reversed. They eschew their former position as one does when ashamed. We might understand that to revere something is to be ashamed of its opposite.

So the goal of our disassociation is to bring about a change in attitude and behavior. It is to draw someone back to the path of obedience, back to seeking and doing the will of Christ.

3:15 and yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

This is an important verse to remember in dealing with the disobedient. It is so easy in any disagreement to view the opposition as the enemy. They are not in this case. They have simply become blinded to the truth. It is the truth they are fighting and not us. They are to be pitied and mourned over because they are deceived.

The word that describes what is to be done to such a person is rendered admonish. It means to place in the mind of. It is a gentle rebuke. The word implies making a clear statement that leaves no doubt in the mind of the person what the issues are. It is not enough to hint around in such a situation and to speak indirectly. Admonishment is a firm, friendly, precise statement of the matter. It is good when it includes a clear

embrace of the person's value and the summons up to higher ground. That says something like, "I believe in you, and I cherish our friendship. I am concerned about your choice to disobey the counsel of Scripture in this area."

The phrase that comes after the word "admonished" is very important. We are to admonish such a person "as a brother." That phrase emphasizes that it is to be done with love and affection, as to a peer in spiritual things, with appropriate humility, with grace, with patience and concern. There is a clear contrast made between the terms enemy and brother. The commonly understood bonds associated with family are to carry the day not hostile emotions that can so easily begin to flare up when confrontation is called for.

So in this instruction to the Thessalonians regarding the rebellious we have the clear idea given of disassociation. That harmonizes with the rest of what Scripture says about church discipline. We also have the clear statement here that indicates that we are not to employ hostility and deliberate attempt to make one suffer. This indicates that in the severe cases where resolution and changes do not come about there should simply be release. Consequences will take over and punish the person, but we should not. Our stance in such a case should remain firm. It should be one of continued admonishment and clear restatement of concern and affection. It is likely that in such cases other Scriptures come more into play. Paul is assuming the person in this case will reverse their field and stay in harmony with the teaching of the apostles.

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

In the final days of Jesus' life, He wept over Jerusalem because they had not learned the things that make for peace (Luke 19:41-44). Though they lived in the city that bore the name of peace, they never submitted to Yahweh and so never found peace. In this they have modeled the human problem. We can learn the rhetoric of God but then we usually balk at trusting Him enough to do things His way. So peace eludes us. It is not just that there are wars on the planet. It is that there is war raging inside each of us.

The Thessalonians along with all who ever since have embraced Jesus Christ by faith have taken a giant step toward peace. They do what Jerusalem never did. In doing this however, it is not that all the patterns their personal lives are set in order so that they instantly know peace. But this initial step has been taken that makes all the other steps they will need to take possible. The Thessalonians had peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Now they could be led by His Spirit and find peace in all the details of their personal lives (Romans 5:1-6). They had this to look forward to.

Jesus is called by Paul the Lord of peace. There is a glorious character that He has as a Ruler that brings peace wherever He is allowed to rule. He is the Teacher who brings instruction that leads to peace for all who are attentive. He is the Advocate whose work on our behalf delivers a peace with Yahweh that cannot be shaken. His work in our behalf when met with our faith allows His Spirit to be joined to ours. He becomes a source of peace from deep within us.

Paul expresses this thought regarding our peace in the form of a prayer, using what is called grammatically the optative mood. It is a mood that expresses a wish, a prayer or a desire one has for another. Paul knew the things that make for peace in this life. He had written the Thessalonians to correct some false beliefs that were creeping in. He has exhorted them to obey the pattern of the truth that was delivered to them. It is

that pattern of truth that leads one to think rightly about themselves, about God, about others, and about the world. His prayer is essentially that they will remain obedient to this body of truth. That is what leads to peace. To leave the path of obedience to the truth is to leave the path of peace. That was the lesson of Paul's own people, the Israelites, recorded for all to read in the Old Testament. And so our peace comes to us through our faithfulness to truth. Where there is submission to truth, there is submission to the Lord of peace. Where He reigns, there is peace.

We are granted peace by the Lord Jesus Christ, but it is granted to us when we submit to His will for us. He uses circumstances, even unpeaceful ones and even the unpleasant experience of conviction along with several peaceful experiences to bring us into the spirit of peace.

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

This statement by Paul reflects what he had said earlier (2:2), that false letters from him were being circulated. The speculation is that Paul's eyesight made writing difficult for him and so others did the actual writing at his direction. In this letter it was likely Silvanus (called Silas elsewhere), or Timothy who did the actual writing. Then at the end of each letter Paul wrote in his own handwriting the phrase that is recorded in the following verse (verse 18). His instruction here clarifies that practice. They could look for the phrase and they could look for the uniqueness of his style of handwriting, likely something that reflected his poor eyesight (Galatians 4:14-15).

In the years that followed those of the apostle's ministry, many fraudulent letters appeared that the churches had to make decisions about. A whole genre of literature known as the pseudepigrapha, as opposed to the autographa is available to this date to church historians. This practice of Paul's was meant to help protect against the myriad of problems such fraudulent documents could create.

3:18 the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

This is the distinguishing, parting word of Paul that we find marks the end of his letters. It was one of the ways in which readers could be certain they were reading his thoughts. It does not always occur at the very end (Romans 15:20; 1 Corinthians 16:23). There are times words are added to it. But the fundamental idea "grace be with you," is always there. Again, Paul's handwriting was an important feature of the idea he is getting across here, that he always ends his letters with the salutation that he himself wrote (Colossians 4:18). The "grace be with you" thought could be borrowed by others, but his own handwriting was distinct.

The idea of grace was so powerful to Paul and fundamental to this thinking. This is seen in the fact that his greeting at the start of his letters and his farewell at the end always spoke of grace. All that was in between could be understood as further definition of the outworking of God's grace in real life.

Grace was to Paul a critical theological idea. It is our experience because it is part of the nature and essence of Yahweh (Ephesians 2:4). It was not just something God chose to do. Grace is who He is. Grace is not simply something that randomly occurs in God, bursting out in random acts at random moments. Grace is continually present in Him and so continually available to all who would appropriate it in the moment to transform us and the situations that we are a part of. So grace is a very practical force in the personal affairs of everyday life in the thought of Paul.

Paul's farewell is really an invitation to appropriate God's grace in the moments of life. It is not a wish that somehow a random encounter with God's grace would happen for the Thessalonians. It is an invitation to live in such a way that His grace is their ongoing quest and experience. That experience in the thought of Paul was normal considering the truth of the cross. He lived to see people grow into this understanding of the lifestyle the sacrifice of Christ brought about.