

1 and 2 Thessalonians

New Testament Survey – Lesson 18

Christian musician Steven Curtis Chapman has put together an orphanage in China. High school groups that come over in the summer to do mission work frequent the orphanage spending time helping the effort.

The kids are always in for an awakening while there. One of the surprising lessons for many, is the orphanage does not let the children spend a great deal of time with the children of a certain age. The missionaries leave after their time there (seven to ten days on average) and the orphanage has learned that these children suffer a “separation anxiety” when the missionary youth group returns home.

Saying “good-bye” is rarely easy. Some are good at it, others not so. Are you someone who takes time to prepare for a long good-bye? Do you have a chance for a last meal? Do you sit down and work through last things that need to be said?

Paul was whisked away from the Thessalonian church, with no time for a good-bye. The church was in its infancy, and had little time for substantial teaching and growth. Paul, perhaps learning from his rabbinical mentor Gamaliel (famous for writing to synagogues), wrote back to the church at Thessalonica, likely at the time Paul was in Corinth. There are two letters we still have today, called “First and Second Thessalonians.”

We do not know with certainty which letter was written first. Most consider the placement and terming of “First” Thessalonians as proof it was written first; however, such is not really fair. Scholars are still uncertain how Paul’s letters were grouped in the New Testament, but all are agreed it was not based on *when* they were written! Most believe the letters are grouped from longest to shortest. Others note the one exception to the size rule and say the letters were grouped by importance of the churches (Romans followed by Corinth, *etc.*). The answer to whether 1 or 2 Thessalonians was written first must be gleaned from reading the letters themselves. Once scholars do that, compelling arguments are assessed for each position. We urge those interested to study the letters themselves and come to their own conclusions!

We pause in the Acts narrative to consider the Thessalonian letters from Paul, taking them in their historical context in the narrative provided by Acts.

THE CONTEXT

Even though we have already covered the New Testament account of Paul evangelizing Thessalonica, we renew our consideration of some of that material as background to our study of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Paul came into Thessalonica after his efforts in Philippi resulted in his jailing, and once released from jail, in his eviction. Paul then walked 70 miles to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was a cosmopolitan town placed at a key port along the road that ran West-East connecting the strength of the Roman Empire with outlying Eastern areas. This road, the Via Egnatia, was a principal thoroughfare that made Thessalonica a major trading point and a commercial center. There was also the major North-South thoroughfare that ran from the Danube to the Mediterranean Sea. Thessalonica was the Roman administrative center for the region of Macedonia.¹

The Jewish presence was strong in Thessalonica, but so were a number of cults that worshiped various deities. At the time of Paul, the chief city cult was that of Cabirus. The notables in Thessalonica threw the community support behind this cult and the ceremonies that went with it. This was a bonding tie that sought to create community allegiance and continuity. A second important cult was the Caesar cult. Also called the Imperial Cult, this religion fostered worship of the Roman Emperor as a god. Anything contrary to the community cult or the imperial cult was, no doubt, deemed destructive for the community. Certain other religions had official sanction that allowed them to exist anyway. Among these allowed faiths was the Jewish faith.

Once in Thessalonica, Paul had gone to the synagogue "as was his custom" (Acts 17:2). For three weeks in a row, Paul went. Paul's incredible credentials (having studied under the premier Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem), put him in an authoritative position every Sabbath when he was given a chance to teach on the Torah and Prophet readings at the synagogue services. Each time he went, Paul worked from the Old Testament explaining and showing why the Messiah ("Christ" in Greek) had to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. Paul told the Jews of Jesus, proclaiming him as the Messiah. Some of the Jews "were persuaded" as were a great many Greeks.

As we have seen in other places, the success of God's work incited jealousy among disbelieving Jews who worked up the crowd. Thinking Paul was in the house of one named Jason, a mob descended upon the house. When Paul was not found there, the mob grabbed Jason and some other converts and took them before

¹ Charles Wanamaker, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary – The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Eerdmans 1990) at 4.

the city authorities. Arguing that the Christians were traitors who had a king (named Jesus) in the place of Caesar, the mob convinced the authorities to arrest the believers. After posting bond, Jason and the others were released.

The term Luke uses for the security Jason posted indicates that money was paid and Jason also gave assurance that Paul and Silas would leave the city.² Evidently, Timothy was exempt from this requirement, which would explain why Timothy soon came back to the city (1 Thes. 3:2). After posting this security, the church sent Paul and Silas away from Thessalonica by night.

Paul went to Athens, then to Corinth. While at Corinth, Paul wrote back to the Thessalonians. Scholars are uncertain whether the letter we call 1 Thessalonians or 2 Thessalonians was written first. Of course, Paul did not title the letters themselves; and no one seems to think that Paul's letters are grouped in the Bible based on date written. So, the only way to know the date is to study the letters themselves to see what makes most sense. We are not going into detail in the discussion of the order written, but will treat the letters in the order they are in the Bible, starting with 1 Thessalonians.

As we look at 1 Thessalonians, we should remember that it was a letter to be read in a single setting to the church. While Paul no doubt knew they would re-read the letter and discuss it in its various parts and thoughts, we should never fail to realize the power of considering the letter as a whole as well. Our approach will first center on understanding the whole letter. At a later point in class, we will journey back through the letter to set up a few comments and points for home.

THE 1 THESSALONIANS LETTER

Chapter 1

Paul begins his letter writing on behalf of himself as well as his co-missionaries Silvanus and Timothy. We read in Acts that the two accompanied Paul on his trip to Thessalonica, although Luke used the shortened name of "Silas" for "Silvanus."

At the very beginning, Paul tells the Thessalonians that he constantly prays for them, with thankfulness as he remembers the work that their faith produces, the labor that comes from their love, and the steadfastness that flows from their confidence³ in the return of Christ.

² Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 1998) at 509. See also Paul's reference to being torn away, in spite of his desire to stay in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-18 and the comment in reference thereto in Bock at 553.

³ Our translators use the word "hope" to express the meaning of the Greek *elpis* (ἐλπίς). See our lesson on Paul's time in Philippi for a fuller explanation of the Greek meaning of the word. It is downloadable at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. (Lesson 14, footnote 10).

Paul emphasizes that it was clear God had chosen the Thessalonians because when Paul preached, they did not merely hear the word. The word came into them with conviction, with power, and with the Holy Spirit. As such, the Thessalonians became Christian examples known throughout all of Macedonia. This fits with Thessalonica being the leading city and capital of Macedonia. Paul adds, though, that the reputation of the church in Thessalonica extended even to Achaia (modern Greece).

How was the reputation so noteworthy? The Thessalonians had ceased worshipping dead idols! Instead they were serving the living and true God while awaiting the promised return of Jesus, who will bring salvation from the wrath to come.

Chapter 2

Paul explains the value of his visit to Thessalonica. While it came on the heels of his suffering and poor treatment in Philippi, it was a valuable visit anyway. Paul came into Thessalonica boldly declaring the gospel. He did so, even though Thessalonica also had its share of conflict. Paul never tried to flatter the Thessalonians, never used his message to line his pockets, nor did Paul seek to exalt himself in his preaching. Paul's desire was not for Paul, but for the Thessalonians. Like a mother nurses her child, Paul felt tenderly toward the church there.

That is why Paul would work day and night, using his tent maker craft to support himself while he evangelized the unsaved. It did not end there, either. After the unsaved found faith, Paul continued to teach, exhort, encourage, and edify the church like a father does his children, so that they might walk worthy of their calling!

Paul writes special appreciation that the Thessalonians never thought of themselves as receiving simply Paul's words. They understood God was behind the message. They were willing to suffer just as the mother church had in Judea.

Chapter 3

Paul expresses concern about his rapid departure from Thessalonica ("we were torn away from you" 2:17). He tells the Thessalonians he continually wanted to come back and visit them, but was hindered from doing so by Satan. Paul was willing to be left without Timothy in Athens, so that Timothy could at least go back to Thessalonica to minister to the church there. Paul was also worried about how the church was faring and how the church held up to Satan's temptations.

Timothy made the journey, and Paul tells the church about the great comfort and thankfulness he had once Timothy returned and reported on the church's faith and steadfastness. Paul prays that the church's love and holiness would increase more and more until the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

Chapter 4

Paul then encourages the Thessalonians to continue to grow in holiness and sanctification, to walk in ways that please God, more and more. Paul reiterates that God's will is for them to stay away from the sexual immorality of their day, being careful to control their lusts. God never wanted his people controlled by their baser desires. God wants his people above that. God wants them holy. Holiness pleases God, not impurity.

Paul writes of brotherly love also, but not because the Thessalonians lacked it! Paul emphasizes that such love is one of the Thessalonians' strengths. Even still, Paul exhorts them to grow in love more and more!

Paul also urges them to walk properly before the unbelievers. This meant for the Thessalonians to "live quietly," to "mind their own affairs," and to "work with their hands." Paul wanted them to live without relying and depending on the unbelievers for their sustenance. Paul was teaching them to be a light on a hill, an example, to those without faith.

Paul uses the letter to answer some apparent questions the Thessalonians had about the second coming of Christ. Evidently, there was a worry that some had died after becoming Christians and the Thessalonians had concerns about whether those people would miss out! Paul assured the Thessalonians that death would not prevent anyone from sharing in Jesus' second coming. Jesus himself died and was resurrected. God will likewise raise others who have "fallen asleep."

Paul explained that the second coming will happen with Jesus descending from heaven "with a cry of command" (authority), "with the voice of an archangel," and "with the sound of a trumpet." The dead in Christ will actually rise first! Then, those who are still alive will be "caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." For eternity, we shall all together be with the Lord. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians with these words and urged them similarly to encourage each other.

Chapter 5

Before Paul quit writing on the second coming, he addressed the question of "when" it might occur. Paul reminds the Thessalonians what they already knew, that man did not know when the second coming was going to occur. "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Some ignorant people might think a day is peaceful and secure, yet that might be their day of destruction. But the day should not surprise the church because the church should live every day sober and watchful. Knowing we are destined for salvation through Christ rather than destruction of the world, the church is to live each day with a breastplate of faith and love and a helmet of confidence in our salvation. Again, Paul emphasizes, the church should understand this teaching as encouraging and use it accordingly.

As Paul brings this letter to a close, he urges the church to respect their overseers in the church. The church should have peace within its ranks. The idle should be

admonished to work, the fainthearted should be encouraged, and the weak should be helped. Over all, the church should let patience reign. The church should be a worker of good, even to those who are evil and undeserving. The church should rejoice always, pray non-stop, and be ever thankful, whatever the circumstances. The church should be careful not to quench the Spirit or despise prophecies. Neither should the church accept everything at face value. Rather by testing everything, the church should adhere to the good and abstain from the evil.

Paul closes the letter with a benediction proclaiming God's blessing to sanctify and keep the body, soul, and spirit of the Thessalonians blameless. Paul then seeks the prayers of the church and asks that his letter be read to all the Christians.

THE ANALYSIS AND POINTS FOR HOME

1 Thessalonians gives us good insight into Paul's missionary efforts. From it, we get solid glimpses into the things Paul taught during the month or so he was in Thessalonica.

1. "Works of faith and labors of love" (1:3).

Even in this very early writing of Paul, we see the groundwork of his theology that pervades the whole body of his works. Consider the early passage where Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians' "work of faith and labor of love." Paul always saw faith as an active and life changing force that brought about works for the Master. The idea of a dead faith was foreign to Paul. By the same token, Paul never confused the source of what made a "good work" good! It was a work produced by faith, a labor prompted by love.

If we use the analogy of works being fruit produced on a tree, we see Paul was concerned not because of the importance of the fruit, but because fruit showed the condition of the tree. The fruit showed these wonderful people had truly "turned to God from idols" (1:9).

We should all soberly look at our lives. Do we work for our Master and Lord because of our convictions of who he is and what he has done for us? Does his love for us, and our returning love of him move us to labor for him? If so, may we grow more and more in faith and love. If not, we have a serious problem – a problem of faith and love. That problem demands attention, for there is nothing more serious.

2. "Turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1:9).

Paul knew the cultic traditions and practices of Thessalonica. He had spent a month or so there. Paul affirms the truth of the Christian faith as central and real truth – not an option, but the answer. Paul contrasts the old worship in idols to the faith and service of *the* living and true God. The clear implication is that any other religion was one of a dead and false god. Neither Caesar nor the cult of the day was worthy of the worship and adoration of the Thessalonians.

Paul preached the true service of God, but he also lived it! Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he did his work out of faith and love as well. Paul never sought money from the Thessalonians; nor did he seek their praise. Paul was discharging his service to the same God that the Thessalonians were called to serve. Paul was practicing before their very eyes what he preached.

Who or what do we worship? Maybe the question gets a more honest answer if we break apart the word, “worship.” Who or what do we ascribe worth to? What do we value? Who do we idolize? Do we understand that *no one* and *nothing* is worthy of our praise, adoration, worship, or value save the living and true God? Everything else is dead (or will be soon!). Our eternal God alone is worthy of our worship!

3. “We wanted to come to you” (2:18).

Paul knew that the Thessalonians were concerned over his wellbeing, and it was important to him that they knew he was also concerned for theirs as well. Paul worked not just as a missionary, but also as a pastor. As Morris wrote:

Here we see Paul...concerned for the welfare of his converts, scolding them, praising them, guiding them, exhorting them, teaching them; thrilled with their progress, disappointed with their slowness.⁴

So, Paul gives pastoral advice, “live quietly, work with your hands...walk properly before outsiders” (4:11-12). Let us thank God for our earthly ministers and shepherds who seek to encourage us to specific good works and deeds of holiness. We should never get so caught up in the global concepts of “faith and works” or “worship” that we forget the every day minute-by-minute translation of what those ideas mean. We must remember to focus on our choices we make each step of life. Let us make the steps that would make our heavenly Father smile!

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians, An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale 1956) at 9.

4. “We will always be with the Lord” (4:17).

Paul’s comments about the second coming of Christ echo the very words of Jesus saved for us by Matthew. Ben Witherington III set up a chart indicating the parallels in language and explanation⁵:

	<u>1 Thess.</u>	<u>Matthew</u>
Christ returns	4:16	24:30
From heaven	4:16	24:30
Accompanied by angels	4:16	24:31
With a trumpet of God	4:16	24:31
Believers are gathered to Christ	4:17	24:31, 40-41
In clouds	4:17	24:30
At a time unknown	5:1-2	24:36
Coming like a thief in the night	5:2, 4	24:43
Unbelievers are unaware of coming judgment	5:3	24:37-39
Judgment is like a mother’s birth-pangs	5:3	24:8
Believers are not to be deceived	5:4-5	24:43
And are to be watchful	5:6	24:37-39
Warning against drunkenness	5:7	24:49

Paul lets the Thessalonians know that while no one knows when Jesus will return, he will return nevertheless. What a time of rejoicing that will be! The grand reunion! The reunion will be not only with our Lord, but also with all our loved ones who have already died in Christ.

We should never get so caught up in trying to figure out *when* Jesus is coming such that we forget to use the fact of his coming as encouragement to all in the church. This confidence is our joy in life as well as death.

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 2006) at 136.

THE LETTER OF 2 THESSALONIANS

Chapter 1

Paul writes Second Thessalonians on his own behalf as well as on behalf of his co-missionaries Silas (“Silvanus”⁶) and Timothy. Paul addresses the church as he did in First Thessalonians with one minor difference. Paul writes, “To the church of the Thessalonians in God *our* Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” rather than “God *the* Father and our Lord Jesus Christ” as in First Thessalonians. Paul begins his letter putting himself in a common position as the Thessalonians. With just a small change, Paul is able to relate to his audience and show the commonality of all believers before God, *our* Father. This position mirrors that given by Jesus in teaching his disciples *how* to pray when he taught them to pray “Our Father...” (Mt. 6:9).

Paul greets the Thessalonians with “grace” and “peace,” but not grace and peace as the world offers. Paul offers the grace and “peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul’s sense of grace and peace proceeding from God as Father and Jesus as Lord is consistent with his teaching of God as the giver of all good things. Here again it is important to remember that Paul has identified God as “our Father” from the earlier verse, and that idea extends into this verse. This is something we will notice throughout this letter. Over and over, we will see Paul understanding his own place as one of commonality with the readers.

Paul is also ever thankful to God for their growing faith and increasing love of the church.⁷ Their faith in God was growing, as was their love for each other. Paul adds that this growing love was seen in each member of the church. In this way, Paul affirmed everyone in the church, including those he would soon chide over some other issues later in his letter. Paul so appreciated this growing love and faith that he took constantly told others of the Thessalonians’ faithfulness and steadfastness, especially in light of the persecutions the church was enduring. Paul understood there was something special about those who hold to the Lord tightly when circumstances might seem to make a different path more attractive!

⁶ Luke uses the common form “Silas” in writing up Paul’s second missionary journey. Paul uses the fuller form “Silvanus.” Some Bible translations, like the N.I.V., use the shorter version “Silas” even though Paul writes the extended name “Silvanus.”

⁷ If indeed Paul wrote this letter after writing 1 Thessalonians, this passage would have special meaning to the church. In 1 Thessalonians 3:10 and 3:12, Paul prayed for the faith and love of the church to grow and increase. This follow up letter then singles out both of those traits as ones that had indeed grown in answer to prayer!

We should consider Paul's use of the word translated "steadfastness" in the ESV ("perseverance" in the NIV). The Greek *hupomone* (ὕπομονή) means more than simply a passive acceptance. It is

the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty.⁸

The meaning is found in the English words, "a patient endurance," "fortitude," "steadfastness," or "perseverance." It is a strong and vibrant resolution that difficulties may be endured because they are a prelude to something better. With *hupomone*, the believer is not broken by the strain of affliction and problems. The believer has the confidence that redemption and salvation are assured. So while weeping may last for a night, rejoicing will come in the morning! Leon Morris writes that such perseverance is

the human response to the faithfulness of God. It is the believer's reliance on God's faithfulness for all things.⁹

It makes sense, then, that Paul does not leave the subject of persecution and affliction without noting that a time is coming when our just God will make things right! God's justice will see that the persecutors are repaid while those seeking God's mercy will have relief. This will happen, as the Lord Jesus is revealed in heaven with his angels in flaming fire, "inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."

When we see God is over all, a new perspective on our problems surfaces. We know God is not ignorant of what we are going through. God numbers the hairs on our heads and knows the thoughts of our heart before they become words in our mouths. Surely he knows of our sufferings and travails. For some, then, this becomes a great difficulty in itself. Why, they ask, would a kind and loving God allow his children to suffer, only to bring relief later? As Morris points out:

The New Testament does not look on suffering in quite the same way as do most modern people. To us, suffering is an evil in itself, something to be avoided at all costs...Faith is accordingly not some fragile thing, to be kept in a kind of spiritual cotton wool, insulated from all shocks.

⁸ "ὕπομονή," Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (U. of Chi. 1979), 2d Ed.

⁹ Morris, Leon, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament – The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Eerdmans 1991) at 195. Morris also quotes Calvin demonstrating the obverse side of Paul's statement, "softness and impatience under adversity betoken unbelief on our part."

It is robust. It is to be manifested in the fires of trouble and in the furnace of affliction.¹⁰

Morris goes on to point out that faith is not only manifested in the heat of suffering but it is shaped there as well. So while some flee from suffering as the ultimate harm, for the believer, suffering has its place. There is a time to weep as well as a time to dance.

In the Bible, suffering is a consequence of a fallen world that God uses to cultivate character and teach lessons to the believer. While we might question the love of a God that allows his children to suffer, we should actually do the opposite and find such good coming from suffering as confirming of God's love. Which parent loves his child the most, the one who never lets the child experience discomfort or the one willing to let his child learn the lessons and truths that come from discipline and difficulty?

Having said such, Paul notes that "our Father" does not leave his children in suffering, but brings "relief" to those afflicted. The Greek for "relief" is *anesis* - ἄνεσις from which we get the marketers gave us the name for the medicine "Anacin," a drug meant to offer a measure of relief for the ill. As for those who are wrongfully afflicting the believers, God has affliction coming their way.

When Paul writes of them as "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." It is important to understand what Paul meant with is carefully selected terms. "Gospel," as we have noted before, refers to *the* good news or message. That good news is that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and resurrected. Paul referenced these historical events and their eternal implications as the "gospel" or "good news." Paul wrote this letter while Paul was in Corinth. It is to the Corinthians that Paul made clear the very point when he used the word "gospel." Paul would later write of his time in Corinth saying,

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

Since Paul means the death, burial, and resurrection when he speaks of the "gospel," then some might wonder why Paul speaks of failing to "obey" this gospel. How do we obey such historical events?

Our English translators are using the word "obey" to translate the Greek *hupakouousin* (ὑπακούουσιν). This Greek word is a combination of the verb, "to hear" (*akouo*) with the addition of the word "under" (*hup*). The Greek conveys the idea of hearing and responding or coming under the influence of the gospel. In

¹⁰ *Ibid.* at 197

other words, Paul is speaking of those who hear of the Jesus' death and resurrection, but instead of responding in faith, they leave unaffected and unbelieving.

Paul writes that those who hear of the good news but fail to respond are set to “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” How sad to consider spending eternity away from the presence of God. Some scholars see here Paul teaching that for those unsaved, eternity ultimately results in a destruction that lasts forever, as opposed to an eternal conscious pain and suffering. These scholars hone in on these words where Paul writes of those who “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction.” These are issues we will consider more carefully when we get into Paul's writings in more detail, rather than this overview.

As sad as that day will be for those who do not respond to the gospel, it will be the exact opposite for the saints. This will be a day when God is glorified among his saints, when those who believe will marvel. The triumphant return of Jesus will bring relief to his people¹¹ even as justice comes to the evil.

This is the end result that keeps Paul in prayer. Paul wants the church to live up to its calling! Paul wants the church to find its place working through God's power in faith to the glory of Jesus and his name!

In chapter two of 2 Thessalonians, Paul writes about the second coming of Jesus in more detail. Paul explains that they should not be concerned or disturbed by any reports that Jesus had already returned! That deception could not be true! Paul explains that before the return of Jesus, several things must occur: “unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.”

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he had already told them these things, but apparently some false letter claiming to be from Paul or some verbal explanation had confused the Thessalonians on this point.

The reason the “man of lawlessness” was not yet revealed is that his time was not right. He was restrained, although the mystery of lawlessness was already at work. But the lawless one himself will be revealed in due time. Afterwards, the

¹¹ There is a poetic play of the words used by Paul that we miss in the English. Paul's word for “affliction” is *thlipsis* (θλιψις). It references being in a state of tension where you are pulled (or pushed) in opposite directions at one time. The pressure from this needs relief! This is the beauty of Paul's word choice. While the church was afflicted with pressure trying to push and pull the people apart, a day would come when the pressure would be relieved!

Lord Jesus will appear, destroying the lawless one and bringing his efforts to nothing. This happens as the lawless one is active by Satan's direction and power, with false signs and wonders, and with wicked deception for the perishing. This comes to those who refuse to love the truth and the salvation of Christ.

Paul says these wicked that refuse Christ will receive a strong delusion from God so that they might believe what is false. These lovers of unrighteousness who refuse to believe the truth will be condemned. But not so the Thessalonian church!

That is why Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians. They were chosen by God as "first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." This was the purpose of their calling. God called them to be made holy by God's Spirit. In this, they obtain the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, as they become like him made pure by his Spirit. So, the lesson Paul draws for them is the importance that the church stand firm and hold to the traditions Paul taught or wrote them.

This causes Paul to reflect in prayer that the loving and comforting God *our* Father and the Lord Jesus Christ would comfort their hearts and establish them in good works and words.

As Paul begins to bring his letter to a close, he asks the church to pray for his missionary team. Paul wants prayer first for the word of the Lord to go forth rapidly and be received with honor. Paul also asks for prayers for his missionary team's deliverance and protection from evil and wicked men. So while God can use suffering (chapter 1), the believer should not be out there looking for it or promoting it!

While evil men are present, and while there are men without faith, we must always remember that God is faithful! We can trust God to establish and guard his children from the ultimate evil of Satan. This gave Paul confidence that the Thessalonians would continue following Paul's teachings. Paul prays that the Lord would continue to direct their hearts to the love of God and steadfastness of Christ.

Part and parcel of this exhortation and blessing is Paul's instruction that all the church stay busy before God and man. The believers were to "keep away" from those who walked in idleness outside of the tradition Paul taught. Certainly, Paul's example of working and paying his own way while in Thessalonica should have demonstrated the heart of not wanting to burden anyone.

Paul clearly had a right to ask for support from the church, but he did not. He wanted to set an example of the need to work. Paul has gotten reports about the church. There were some who were more intent on being busybodies than on staying busy. Paul said, "No work, no food!" Paul gently yet firmly instructs the

busybodies to get busy! To “work quietly and to earn their own living.” It is possible, if not likely, that the folks who refused to work were claiming exemption because they mistakenly thought they were already “in the eternal age” where earthly work was inappropriate. Paul seems to be saying “If they think that, let them miss a few meals and see how mortal they really are!”

Paul closes by exhorting the church to stay fresh in living right and doing good. Paul wants the church to “take note” of those who do not follow Paul’s instructions here. Not because such a one is an enemy, but such a one is a brother who needs to be taught and warned!

With those practical instructions, Paul closes his letter praying for the “Lord of peace himself” to give peace at all times to the Thessalonians “in every way.”

No doubt concerned over false letters claiming to be Paul’s, Paul closes his letter signing his name in his own hand to show its genuineness.

ANALYSIS AND POINTS FOR HOME

1. “God *our* Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1, 2).

Paul wonderfully points to the inclusiveness of the church. We are one body and one church (as he will write later to the Corinthians and Ephesians). It was very important to Paul that everyone understands his common standing with them as well as their common standing with each other. Paul reinforces this with his constant prayers and encouragement on the issue of the church showing each other love. This is worthy of our consideration. Too often in America we live in isolation from others. We have our own cars, our separate homes with separate lots. We no longer go to a common community spot to wash clothes; we do that in the privacies of our homes. We do not jointly hunt for food that we divide; we go to the grocery store as we have time. We sit together at church, but we have a great urge to leave a separate seat between our family unit and the next one. We, in America, like our independence, our individuality, and our insulation and space!

Yet, Paul emphasizes over and over the unique harmony and commonality of the church. We need to fight against our natural inclination to live Lone Ranger Christian lives and join our brothers and sisters in love and unity. In our Life Groups (Sunday School classes) that originate these lessons there is a HUGE plug for our connection groups.

We must find others and integrate beyond our individual lives!

2. “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (2:1).

On the second coming, Paul writes some passages that are very difficult to understand. He speaks of the “man of lawlessness,” the “son of destruction” who “takes his seat in the temple of God.” Identity of the man of lawlessness has caused speculation in the church back to the time, probably, of the Thessalonians themselves! Some have identified the man of lawlessness as the Roman Emperor. Starting with the Reformation, some have decided the man of lawlessness was the line of popes, even though Paul seems to be writing of one particular person, not a line of people.

Another aspect of Paul’s teaching here that has engendered immense speculation in the church is the identity of the “restrainer.” In chapter 2:7 and 8, Paul references “he who now restrains” the man of lawlessness. The restrainer has been identified with the extremes of Paul, the Holy Spirit, the archangel Michael and even Satan himself.

We would suggest that absolute identification the man of lawlessness with one certain person is impossible at this point in time. If we take Paul at his word, then this is a man who appears right before the second coming. The man has yet to reveal himself as such.

So if we are going to set aside more careful consideration of identity, why do we make this a point for home? Simple! We are “people-in-waiting.” We await a coming Lord Jesus who will in fact come from heaven one day for his children who await him. But Paul wrote to a church out of concern that the church has wrongly understood the second coming in ways that were influencing their daily lives. Some were apparently distraught over having missed a portion of the coming age. Others were evidently not living responsibly out of anticipation that the second coming was so imminent that no one need any longer plan for tomorrow!

Paul does not want the church so caught up in the second coming that they fail to live properly in the here and now. A brief review of church writings on this issue in just the last 30 years shows “confident explanations” of the end times that interpret current events in ways that are at least distracting for the church, if not outright embarrassing. Is Jesus coming again? Absolutely! Can we figure out when? No! Is it fun to try? For some it is. But let us always keep it in perspective. Paul would have us use the fact of the second coming to encourage one another. He would likely cringe to find out that the issue has actually caused church splits and fellowship issues over fine points of dispute over the how’s and when’s.

Know Jesus is returning, Satan will be destroyed, be encouraged by that fact.

3. “Some of you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies” (3:11).

Paul always keeps a foot firmly on earth even while his gaze is toward heaven. Today counts. God has a plan for his people in eternity, and that plan includes today. We should recognize that the future is our hope. It gives us confidence that what we do today has lasting value. When persecution and affliction are our lot, we know in faith that God is with us molding our character and refining our faith. When the day brings pleasantness instead of suffering, we know God is still there and worthy of our praise and attention.

Each day, each minute, we seek to serve him in faith and practice. He is not just God our Father, he is also our Lord!