

# 1 Thessalonians

## *Excel Still More*

### **Purpose**

To strengthen the faith of the Thessalonians, to offer them counsel in regard to church unity, and to clear up any confusion about Christ's return

### **Summary**

During his second church-planting expedition in Asia Minor, Paul received direction from the Lord to take the Gospel north to Macedonia (*Acts 16:9, 10*). Therefore, after crossing the Aegean Sea, he traveled the great road known as *Via Egnatia*. His journey led him to several key cities, including Philippi and Thessalonica. Founded by King Cassander in 315 BC, Thessalonica was named after his wife Thessalonike, half-sister to Alexander the Great. The great Roman road made Thessalonica a major thoroughfare, having also a Jewish synagogue, which was a perfect place for Paul and his companions to preach the Gospel and plant a church.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy stayed for at least three Sabbaths before they were whisked away in the night by some of the new converts in order to save them from an unruly mob (*Acts 17:1-10*). Because of the nature of their departure, Paul was concerned for the well-being of the Christians in Thessalonica. He desired to send a letter back to them. However, because of the danger (the mob followed him to Berea), he wasn't able to send a letter until he had reached Corinth (*Acts 18:5*). In the meantime, Paul dispatched Timothy to support the believers in Thessalonica and to report back to him regarding the condition of the church (*1 Thess. 3:6, 7*). Paul was encouraged by the report and wrote the letter to the church to strengthen their faith, offer them counsel, and clear up any confusion about Christ's return.

### **Themes**

- **Perseverance Amid Persecution:** Paul praised the Thessalonians for their faithfulness and love in the midst of difficulty. Satan attempted to hinder the Gospel but he could not stop it.
- **Sanctification and Love:** God is conforming us into the image of Christ, to demonstrate His transformative power. Our character and conduct can help or hinder the Gospel's effectiveness.
- **Rapture and Day of the Lord:** The Thessalonians were concerned that their deceased loved ones would miss the return of Christ. Paul provided comforting insight into the end times.
- **Church Unity:** Some Thessalonians quit working to wait for Christ but they became unruly. Paul listed several practical ways that the congregation could encourage unity among them.

### **Leading Ideas**

- True Christ-followers not only preach the Gospel but they practice it (*1:1-10*).
- Just as important as what we share, regarding the Gospel, is how we share it (*2:1-12*).
- Satan actively hinders those sharing and hearing the Gospel (*2:13-20*).
- Just as others' faith encourages us, our faith encourages them (*3:1-13*).
- Followers of Christ must reject spiritual complacency and actively pursue holiness (*4:1-8*).
- Our behavior toward outsiders can either help or hinder the Gospel (*4:9-12*).
- Whether we are dead or alive, Jesus will return for us and we will be with Him (*4:13-18*).
- Only those who walk in darkness need to fear the Day of the Lord (*5:1-11*).
- Church unity does not fall to leaders alone; it is the responsibility of all believers (*5:12-22*).
- We serve a faithful God who will complete the work that He started (*5:23-28*).

### **Penmen**

The Apostle Paul was the primary author with the full support of his co-laborers Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy. Notice the pronouns "we" and "our" in the letter.

### **Recipients**

The new believers in Thessalonica (originally called Therma, today Salonica), in the province of Macedonia, along the *Via Egnatia* highway

### **Date Written**

Historical evidence places this letter around 50-51 AD, written in Corinth, during Proconsul Gallio's short time in office (*Acts 18:12*).

Thus, *1 Thessalonians* was one of Paul's earliest letters, perhaps second to *Galatians*, which was written in 49-50.

### **Special Feature**

Because of Paul's emphasis on the "Day of the Lord" or the Second Coming of Christ (eschatology), his two letters to the Thessalonians are often referred to as the "eschatological letters."

### **Key Verses**

"Finally, then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God, just as you actually do walk, that you excel still more."

*1 Thessalonians 4:1*

## 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

<sup>1</sup> “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. <sup>2</sup>We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers, <sup>3</sup>constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, <sup>4</sup>knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; <sup>5</sup>for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction, just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”

### Faith, Hope, and Love

*Romans 5:2-5*

*1 Corinthians 13:13*

*Galatians 5:5, 6*

*Colossians 1:4, 5*

*Hebrews 6:10-12*

*Hebrews 10:22-24*

*1 Peter 1:3-8, 21, 22*

### Election

*John 1:13*

*Acts 13:46-48*

*Romans 8:33; 9:15, 16*

*1 Corinthians 1:30*

*Ephesians 1:4*

*Colossians 3:12*

*2 Timothy 2:10*

*Titus 1:1*

*1 Peter 1:1, 2*

## A Picture of the Gospel

*Paul's Salutation*

### Leading Idea

*True Christ-followers not only preach the Gospel but they also practice it.*

As one would expect to find in the opening of a letter, there are three essential pieces included – the author(s), the recipient(s), and a greeting (*v.1*). The Apostle Paul was the primary writer; the other two men, Silvanus and Timothy, were co-laborers with Paul. Silvanus was the Latin name for Silas, one of “the leading men among the brethren” (*Acts 15:22*), whom Paul asked to join him and revisit the churches he planted in Asia Minor (*15:40*). Silas is later mentioned as helping Peter write one of his letters (*1 Peter 5:12*). Timothy was a young disciple whom Paul and Silas met along the way. He was highly regarded by the people. Paul asked him to assist them on their mission (*Acts 16:1-3; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Philemon 1*). Timothy was instrumental as a messenger (*Phil. 2:19; 1 Thess. 3:1-7*), as an eventual pastor at Ephesus (*1 Tim. 1:3*), and as the successor to Paul’s ministry. Paul used the plural pronouns “we” and “us” eighty times in this letter. He referred to himself only four times.

Thessalonica was a populous trade city along the *Via Egnatia* (highway) in Macedonia. As was Paul’s custom, he entered the synagogue and “reasoned with the Jews from the Scriptures,” convincing them that Jesus was the Messiah (*Acts 17:1-10*). Among those converted were Jason (*17:5*), Aristarchus, and Secundus (*20:4*) and a number of women. Because of opposition by jealous Jews, concerned friends escorted Paul and his teammates out of town. They only spent three Sabbaths in Thessalonica (at least), which explains Paul’s urgency to write a letter to the new believers there (*2:17-3:2*).

When Paul described the church of the Thessalonians, he said that they were “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (*v.1*). This phrase was intentional, as it recognized the divinity of Christ, the fact that He was and is one with and the same as God, a claim that would’ve separated Christians from the Jews. It was this claim that caused the original uproar in Thessalonica (*Acts 17:2, 3; 1 John 2:23*). Paul added his signature greeting – grace and peace (*v.1*). Grace is God’s unmerited favor (the cause) and peace is an undisturbed calmness (the effect), not from our circumstances but in the midst of them.

Paul prayed often for the believers in Thessalonica (*v.2*), thanking God for their response to the Gospel, which would have been an encouragement to them. Here is a good reminder for us not only to pray for others but also to tell them we are doing so. Next, Paul provided three characteristics of the Thessalonian church – faith, love, and hope (*v.3*). Regarding their “work of faith,” they remained committed to Christ despite the opposition and persecution they were facing. Regarding their “labor of love,” they were very hospitable towards all people (*1:9; 4:9, 10*). Regarding their “steadfastness of hope,” they were unwavering in their belief that Christ would return soon, perhaps any day. The theme of faith, hope, and love is a pattern in Paul’s letters (*1 Cor. 13:13; 1 Thess. 5:8*).

Next, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that, as believers, they were chosen by God (*v.4*). In other words, the process of salvation is initiated by God and people respond accordingly (with the faith that He supplies, *Ephesians 2:8, 9*). Here, then, is the doctrine of election or pre-destination. This topic surfaced several times in Paul’s two letters to the Thessalonians (*1:6, 9; 5:9; 2 Thess. 2:13*). Space does not allow a full explanation of election here, but we must recognize its validity and importance because the New Testament abounds with references to it (see the margin for more examples).

Finally, Paul described the way that the Gospel was presented to the Thessalonians – in word (we must use words), in power (perhaps associated with miracles and/or life transformation, *1 Cor. 2:4, 5*), in the Spirit (as He indwells those converted), with conviction (as they were convinced of their sin and need of a Savior), and with character (the conduct of the men gave weight to the message). Oftentimes Christians betray their Gospel words with their worldly actions (*v.5*). It does not help the cause when we talk the talk but do not walk the walk. The best witness to those around us is a God-honoring life. Are we a picture of the Gospel or does our lifestyle betray the Gospel we are attempting to promote?

<sup>6</sup> “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup>so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup>For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. <sup>9</sup>For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, <sup>10</sup>and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.”

#### Waiting for the Lord

Luke 12:36

1 Corinthians 11:26

2 Corinthians 5:2

Galatians 5:5

Philippians 3:20; 4:5

Titus 2:13

Hebrews 9:28

James 5:7-9

1 Peter 4:7

Revelation 3:11

Revelation 22:7, 12, 20

## An Example to Others

*Exhibiting Christ in Word and Deed*

### Leading Idea

*Only when we imitate Christ do we become most worthy of imitation.*

This passage is a continuation of Paul’s introduction (v.1-5), in which he praised God for the Thessalonians’ response to the Gospel. The connecting words are “you also” (v.6). Paul noted that they had become “imitators of [them] and of the Lord” (v.6). Several times in his letters to the churches, Paul told new believers to imitate him (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:15-17; 2 Thess. 3:7-9). To imitate means to follow in manners, to copy in form, or to resemble. In other words, Paul encouraged them to live as he did. However, Paul quickly followed his advice with the reason why others should imitate him. It was not because he was a perfect man but because he endeavored to imitate Christ. Only when we imitate Christ do we become most worthy of imitation. Are our actions and words worthy of imitation? Do we live in such a way that we could encourage others to imitate us?

Next, Paul pointed out the specific way in which the Thessalonians imitated him – “having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (v.6). In other words, Paul spotlighted their perseverance in the midst of persecution. Not only did they cling to the Gospel under threats of an unruly mob but they viewed their suffering with joy, knowing that they were “sharing in the suffering of their Savior,” for the glory of God (1 Peter 4:12-14). Enduring such difficult circumstances with joy is only possible through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22, 23; James 1:2-4).

The Thessalonians’ example of faithfulness and joy caused a ripple effect throughout the region. They “became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” (v.7). At that time, the Romans had organized Greece into two sections – Macedonia in the north (where Thessalonica was located) and Achaia in the south (where Corinth and Athens were located). In other words, Paul said that their reputation preceded them and that news of their faithfulness spread across the region (v.7). Paul even added that he didn’t need to say anything because their walk did all of the talk (v.8).

In the Greek, the word “example” (v.7) refers to a mark or stamp. The incredible example of the Thessalonian church was making an impression, an impact, on those around them. We must be aware at all times, whether we believe it or not, that people are watching and listening to us. We have opportunities every day to influence others positively or negatively, to make a mark on them, to impress them for the glory of God (Matt. 5:16). Do our lives say it all, where no words are needed? When Paul visited other cities, people reported to him what they had heard about the Thessalonians, that they were hospitable and that they had turned from idols to worship the one true God (v.9). The example of Thessalonica provides clear evidence of the power of the Gospel to transform a heathen society. When sinners respond to Christ, they repent from their idolatry and immorality. The best way to transform society is from internal to external. The Gospel is the most effective change agent.

Finally, Paul commended the Thessalonians for their eagerness for Christ to return (v.10). Thus, the return of Christ is a major topic in his two letters to them (3:13; 4:15-17; 5:8, 23; 2 Thess. 3:6-13). Perhaps there was some confusion surrounding this topic because Paul did not have time to explain it fully. Thus, he felt the need to include an explanation in his letters. Whatever the case, they were thoroughly convinced that Jesus was alive and that He would return any day.

Notice that they were waiting for Him “from heaven” (v.10). That is what the angels told Christ’s followers at His ascension. He would return the same way that He departed (Acts 1:11). The fact that Jesus could come any day supports the rapture theory; otherwise we would be waiting for other events to occur first. Paul also wrote that He would rescue us from the wrath to come (v.10). Was Paul referring to God’s wrath on the earth or on unbelievers at judgment? It could be both events, but given the context (the rest of the letter), it seems logical that Paul was referring to the wrath which God would pour out on the earth. Because of the rapture, we will be saved from this event (more to come).

<sup>1</sup> “For you know that our coming to you was not in vain, <sup>2</sup>but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel... amid much opposition. <sup>3</sup>For our exhortation does not come from error, impurity or by way of deceit; <sup>4</sup>but we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing to men but God who examines our hearts. <sup>5</sup>For we never came with flattering speech nor with a pretext for greed... <sup>6</sup>nor did we seek glory from men..., even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. <sup>7</sup>But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her children. <sup>8</sup>Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but our own lives, because you had become dear to us. <sup>9</sup>For you recall our labor and hardship, how working night and day, so as not to be a burden..., we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. <sup>10</sup>You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly, uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you...; <sup>11</sup>you know how we were exhorting, encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his children, <sup>12</sup>so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His kingdom and glory.”

## With Sincerity and Gentleness

*The Character of the Gospel*

### Leading Idea

*Just as important as what we share, regarding the Gospel, is how we share it.*

After his opening comments, in which Paul commended the Thessalonians for their example to others (1:1-10), he reminded them of the example that he demonstrated for them. “You became imitators of us,” he wrote (1:6). Next, Paul described what exactly they were imitating. Taken as a whole, this passage (2:1-12) is a perfect pattern for us to follow in regards to the character in which we should couch and communicate the Gospel to others.

Paul faced criticism for his ministry; therefore, he added this passage as a means of defense (2:1-12). First, in contradiction to what his opponents said, it is obvious after reading the Thessalonians’ response to the Gospel that his visit to Thessalonica was “not in vain” (v.1). The Lord did some amazing things despite his brief stay.

Second, the fact that Paul and Silas continued sharing the Gospel after their horrible experience in Philippi was both courageous and commendable (Acts 16:19-24). Despite their harsh treatment (arrest, trial, public humiliation, beating, imprisonment), Paul and Silas went to Thessalonica and shared Christ’s message of salvation (v.2). The hope of the Gospel is worth whatever suffering we endure.

Third, Paul defended the message that they shared and how they shared it (v.3). Since they were “entrusted by God with the Gospel” (v.4), they made sure that they represented Him well. They did not speak from “error, impurity, or by way of deceit,” meaning that they did not distort or compromise the truths of the Gospel in order to gain followers, saying only what people wanted to hear (pleasing men with flattery, v.4, 5). Neither did they use the Gospel for profit or to seek glory (v.6). Although they could’ve played the Apostle card, touting their special position and divine authority, they spoke with humility, integrity, and with pure motives, “pleasing God who examines our hearts” (v.4). They proved to be “gentle as a nursing mother” (v.7), not rushing or forcing people to make a decision, not bullying them or manipulating them in any way, but allowing the Holy Spirit to call people to repentance.

Fourth, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that he not only shared the truths of the Gospel with them but he opened up and shared his life with them (v.8). In other words, Paul was genuine, sincere, and transparent. He was not a phony or a pretender or a charlatan, but rather he was real, sensible, and straight-forward with people. They could see that he not only meant what he said but he lived what he said. As the saying goes, people will not care what we know until they know that we care.

Next, Paul pointed out that he and Silas did not ask for money, food, lodging, or any special privileges. Rather, they “worked night and day, so as not to be a burden” to anyone (v.9). They didn’t want their message to be compromised by imposing on the people. They were not there to gain something from them but to give something to them that would change their lives. In this aspect, Paul and Silas were acting in a way that was above reproach, “upright and blameless” (v.10).

Oftentimes parents undermine their own credibility with their children by their misconduct. Their words are compromised by their actions. That’s why our conduct is so important, especially around non-Christians. We must make sure that our lifestyle does not hinder our message in any way. Paul and Silas not only “exhorted and encouraged people as a father would his children” (v.11), but also they behaved in such a way that those who watched them would likewise “walk in a manner worthy of God...” (v.12).

In summary, this passage provides a perfect example of how to share the Gospel, not to deceive or flatter, not for personal gain or glory, but with sincerity and gentleness, for the love of God and people. The Gospel message alone is effective. We need not overstate it; we must not undermine it.

<sup>13</sup> “For this reason we also constantly thank God that, when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. <sup>14</sup>For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, <sup>15</sup>who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God but hostile to all men, <sup>16</sup>hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles, so that they may be saved, with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost. <sup>17</sup>But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while -- in person not in spirit -- were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. <sup>18</sup>For we wanted to come to you -- I, Paul, more than once -- and yet Satan hindered us. <sup>19</sup>For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? <sup>20</sup>For you are our glory and joy.”

## Hindering the Gospel

*Satan's Roadblocks*

### Leading Idea

*Satan actively hinders those sharing and hearing the Gospel.*

After Paul explained how he shared the Gospel with the Thessalonians (2:1-12), he turned his attention to the persecution that they faced as a result (v.13-20). Why does persecution always follow the preaching of the Gospel? From the beginning, mankind was doomed by his sin, and he has since been under the dominion of God's adversary, Satan. However, by sending Jesus to die on the cross, God provided a way for man to be reconciled to Him, to be saved from his sins, from death or spiritual separation from God, and from the wrath and judgment to come. This is the message of hope, the Gospel, that Christ can and does set men free from the yoke of the enemy. “He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13). Satan has done and will do whatever he can to keep as many sinners as possible from turning to Jesus and escaping his dominion. Thus, persecution is a major part of Satan's strategy to disrupt, derail, and even destroy the Gospel's effectiveness.

In the opening verse of this passage (v.13), Paul described the power of the Gospel to change lives. “It performs its work in those who believe.” Once an individual is transformed internally by Christ, the indwelling Holy Spirit begins to change the individual externally (the process of sanctification), conforming him to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). What is it about Paul's words that are so transformative? They are transformative because they are not his words but God's words. Notice that the Thessalonians received his words “not as the words of men but as for what they really are -- the words of God.” All Scripture is God's Word, and God's Word is transformative, able to change people's lives from the inside out (2 Tim. 3:14-17).

Like weeds that attempt to choke a good seed planted in good soil, in order to keep it from blossoming, so our adversary goes to work choking out the spread of the Gospel. As soon as the Thessalonians received the Word of God and witnessed its transformative power, “they experienced sufferings from the hands of their own countrymen” (v.14), as the churches in Judea had done before them. The Jews, who killed the Old Testament prophets and crucified Jesus (Acts 7:51-53), fought against the early church, launching a vicious attack against Christians throughout the region (Acts 8). Those same Jews “hindered Paul and Silas from speaking to the Gentiles so that they might be saved” (v.15). As a result, the Jews have “filled up their measure of sins” (to the max) and will suffer the wrath to come (v.16). Paul did not clarify this wrath. It may refer to the general hardening of the hearts of the Jewish people for a time (Rom. 11). It may refer to the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD), the subsequent dispersion and anti-Semitic attitude, or the pouring out of God's wrath on the earth during the Tribulation.

Even as Satan was persecuting the Thessalonians in order to squelch the Gospel's success, he was also hindering Paul and Silas from returning to them so that they could continue their work (v.17, 18). The angry mob from Thessalonica followed them to Berea and forced them out of town, so that “the brethren sent them as far as Athens” (Acts 17:13-15). Though Paul was not with the Thessalonians in body, he was with them in spirit. In other words, he desired to be with them and hated that his time had been cut short. Thus, Paul did the next best thing. He wrote and sent a letter.

Though it appeared that Satan had won this round, separating Paul and Silas from the Thessalonians, it was too late. The seed of the Gospel had already been planted in the good soil of their hearts and it was bearing fruit, even in the midst of persecution (a sign of true conversion). That's why Paul was so ecstatic and complimentary in the opening of his letter. Despite the enemy's attempts to stop God's work, the message of hope in Christ, as well as the transformation of the Thessalonian believers (from idols to the true God), was spreading throughout Macedonia. Thus, Paul ended this passage with exuberant words. “Who is our joy and crown of exultation” or reason to celebrate? Is it not you? You are our glory and joy” (v.19, 20). Though Satan may hinder the Gospel, he cannot stop it!

<sup>1</sup> “Therefore, when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens <sup>2</sup>and we sent Timothy... to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, <sup>3</sup>so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; ...for we have been destined for this. <sup>4</sup>For when we were with you, we kept telling you that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass. <sup>5</sup>For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you and our labor would be in vain. <sup>6</sup>But now that Timothy has... brought us good news of your faith and love and that you think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we long to see you, <sup>7</sup>for this reason, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted through your faith; <sup>8</sup>for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord. <sup>9</sup>For what thanks can we render to God in return for all the joy... on your account, <sup>10</sup>as we keep praying that we may see your face and make complete what is lacking in your faith? <sup>11</sup>Now may our God and Father and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; <sup>12</sup>and may the Lord cause you to abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we do for you; <sup>13</sup>so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness... at the coming of our Lord with all His saints.”

## A Test of Faith

*Persevering Under Persecution*

### Leading Idea

*Just as others' faith encourages us, our faith encourages them.*

As Paul mentioned in the previous passage (2:13-20), Satan actively works to disrupt the Gospel's effectiveness. An angry mob of Jews not only ran Paul and his teammates out of Thessalonica but it also made life difficult for the believers there (*Acts 17:1-8*). As a mother worries about her children when they are away from her, so Paul was concerned for the faith of these new converts in the midst of such difficult circumstances. Therefore, when they “could endure it no longer,” they sent Timothy back to check on them, to strengthen and encourage their faith (*v.1, 2*).

Paul didn't want the Thessalonians to “be disturbed by their afflictions” (*v.3*), as something that was out of the ordinary, to scare them into recanting their newfound faith. He reminded them that “we were destined for this.” In other words, persecution of faithful Christ-followers is to be expected. In fact, Paul had warned them that they were going to “suffer affliction, and so it came to pass” (*v.4*). Since Christ was persecuted, we too will suffer persecution. It is inevitable (*Acts 9:15, 16; 14:21, 22*).

Next, Paul wrote that he was afraid that “the tempter may have tempted” the Thessalonians and that his “labor might have been in vain” (*v.5*). Keeping the faith or being faithful to God is relatively easy when life is good, but when life becomes difficult, particularly when it is our faith that is causing the difficulty, we oftentimes doubt or second-guess our faith. We stray away from the faith and instead of being faithful, we become faithless. There is no such thing as neutral in the Christian life. Like a car in neutral goes downhill, we have a natural tendency to drift away from God. If we simply coast through life without disciplining ourselves, we will fall away from the things of God. That's why Paul told Timothy to “discipline himself for the purpose of godliness” (*1 Tim. 4:7*).

I must stop here and point out the failure of modern evangelism. When our message to the masses becomes “Follow Jesus and you will have a wonderful life,” we are being unfaithful to the true Gospel. In most cases, following Christ will lead us into difficulty, not out of it. Christ never promised an easy life but to be with us through difficulties. Our message to the masses must be true to His message, that in ourselves we fall short of the glory of God. Because of our sin, our relationship with Him is broken, and only through Christ can that relationship be restored. Because of Christ, we can be made new. As evangelist Ray Comfort says, “We don't put on parachutes to make our flight more comfortable but because the plane is going down, and we need someone to rescue us. Jesus is our parachute.”

When Timothy returned from the Thessalonians and brought news of their faithfulness, Paul was delighted and relieved. “We were comforted through your faith; for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord” (*v.6-9*). The Apostle John said the same thing in one of his letters. “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth” (*3 John 4*). It is true that our faithfulness encourages others in their faith; likewise, our faith is encouraged by the faith of others. Here again is a reminder of the importance of community in the church. Our attendance and active participation in the gathering of believers is an encouragement to their faith. We need the church and the church needs us.

Finally, though he had just expressed his joy and comfort after hearing of their faith, Paul shared his desire to see the Thessalonians again, “to make complete what was lacking in their faith” (*v.10*). At first, this might seem like a contradiction. Was their faith commendable or lacking? Both. Though Paul was encouraged by their devotion in the midst of difficulty, his time with them was brief. He perhaps didn't get to share all that he wanted. He will eventually get his wish and return (*Acts 20:1*). In the meantime, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to demonstrate love for all people, even those who persecuted them, so that they would be without blame when Christ returned (*v.12, 13; 5:23*). Here Paul inserted another intriguing phrase, “with His saints” (*2 Thess. 1:7-10*). Who are they, angels or people? We will study the return of Christ in detail in a later passage (*Matt. 13:39, 48, 49; 16:27; Rev. 19:14*).

## Excel Still More

*The Process of Sanctification*

### Leading Idea

*Followers of Christ must reject spiritual complacency and actively pursue holiness.*

<sup>1</sup> “Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk) that you excel still more.

<sup>2</sup>For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup>For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality, <sup>4</sup>that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, <sup>5</sup>not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God, <sup>6</sup>and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter, because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.

<sup>7</sup>For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity but in sanctification. <sup>8</sup>So he who rejects this is not rejecting men but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.”

In this chapter, Paul transitioned from praising the Thessalonians (Chapters 1-3) to giving practical instruction. Note the word “finally” (v.1). While he was with them, Paul instructed them regarding “how they ought to walk (live) and please God,” commandments given by “the authority of the Lord Jesus” (v.2). Though the Thessalonians were doing well, Paul challenged them to do better than well and to “excel still more” (v.1). For this was the will of God – their sanctification (v.3).

The word sanctification means “the act of making holy” or “the act of God’s grace by which the affections of men are purified or alienated (separated) from sin and the world and exalted to a supreme love of God” (*Webster’s 1828*). The second definition of sanctification is “the act of consecrating or of setting apart for a sacred purpose.” This process of making us holy has three phases. First, there is *positional* sanctification, which occurs at the moment of salvation. We are instantly made right with God by the Holy Spirit. Our position is changed from that of a sinner deserving God’s wrath to a saint who, because of Christ, is made flawless in God’s eyes (*Rom. 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:5; Col. 1:13*). God is the sole initiator of this first phase. In our original sinful state, we can do nothing to change our position before Him. Therefore, salvation is a work of God not men.

What Paul referred to in this passage is the second phase, which is called *progressive* sanctification. Though we are sanctified internally by God, our new nature is trapped in our sinful flesh. While the two battle each other (*Rom. 7:1-7*), Christ-followers will gradually become more like Him, walking in His steps, adhering to His values, obeying His words, etc. (*Rom. 8:29*). Christians will more fully cooperate with the indwelling Holy Spirit, yield to His control, and bear fruit that resembles Christ (*Gal. 5:22, 23*). Since we are flawed in our flesh and our goal is to be conformed to the image of Christ, then there will always be more sanctifying to do. In other words, our pursuit of holiness will not be completed until we are finally with the Lord. When our holiness is made complete, that is phase three – *permanent* sanctification. “He who began a good work in us will complete it” (*Phil. 1:6*).

For believers, then, we must never become complacent with where we are in the Christian life. We must always press on and pursue holiness. There is no time to coast or to be satisfied with mediocrity. Our war against the flesh, against sin, against temptation, is ongoing and so we must be vigilant to fight. At first, obvious sin in our lives must be removed. Like removing weeds from a garden, once the “bigger” sins are removed, the less obvious ones become more apparent. We must be pulling weeds. In this second phase of sanctification, we cooperate with God. With the help of the Holy Spirit, He enables us to do the pulling and, in time, we (and others) will notice a difference in our lives.

Evidently, before coming to know Christ, the Thessalonians were plagued with sexual immorality. Paul challenged them to separate from those things that would displease God in this area (v.3). His will is purity in our relationships, in our marriage, and in our sex life, “that we know how to possess our own vessel in honor...” (v.4). The word “vessel” here could mean one’s body (*2 Tim. 2:20, 21*) or one’s wife (*1 Peter 3:7*). Either way, Paul stressed purity, honoring God with one’s body (*1 Cor. 6:18-20*) and keeping the marriage bed pure (*Heb. 13:4*). Paul admonished them to act differently than the non-believing Gentiles, who surrendered to their sinful passions (v.5), and not to defraud (deprive or cheat) their brothers by adultery (v.6). Though the relationship may be “secretive,” God sees all and He is the avenger or judge (v.6). He repays men for their actions.

Sexual purity is just one way in which God expects us to honor Him. He has “predestined us, called us, justified us, and now sanctifies us” (*Rom. 8:29*). His purpose is for us to pursue a life of purity or holiness (v.7) until we are finally glorified. To reject this calling is to reject the Holy Spirit, whose mission it is to make us holy (v.8). Have you become complacent or are you excelling still more?

<sup>9</sup> “Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; <sup>10</sup>for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more <sup>11</sup>and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, <sup>12</sup>so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.”

## Love and Life

*Behavior Toward Outsiders*

### Leading Idea

*Our behavior toward outsiders can either help or hinder the Gospel.*

This passage is a continuation of Paul’s previous train of thought (4:1-8), that of sanctification, the truth that God’s will for all Christ-followers is to pursue personal holiness. His purpose in that process is to mold us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29). Thus, we are to reject spiritual complacency and “excel still more” to become like Him (4:1). The first area that Paul emphasized was sexual purity. We should honor God with our body and the relationships that we have.

The second area that Paul emphasized was “love of the brethren” (v.9, 10). His comment was that there was “no need for anyone to write” to them about love for two reasons. First, they were “taught by God to love one another” and, second, they were already practicing it.

The one quality that best characterizes Christianity is love. It was love that compelled God the Father to send His Son Jesus to rescue humanity from its fallen state. “For God so loved the world that He sent His only Son...” (John 3:16). Love was the driving force behind the earthly ministry of Jesus, and it was love that He expected of His followers. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you... By this, all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:14, 15). When asked to provide the greatest commandment, Jesus responded, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart... and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30, 31). The Apostle Paul regularly wrote of love. “Now faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

Love is a distinctive of our faith. Love is reflective of our God and Savior. Love is the natural outflow of the Spirit of God indwelling us. As we are conformed into the image of Christ, we will treat others as He did, with an unselfish, sacrificial love. It is love that attracts people to Christ. It is love that opens the door for us to share the Gospel. It is love that heals this fallen world of its bitter hatred and disunity. The Thessalonians were already demonstrating love, but Paul challenged them “to excel still more” (v.10). We must never allow our love to become cold, callous, or complacent; rather we must always seek ways in which we can share the love of God with others through our words and works.

Part of expressing our love for others is to be a good neighbor, and part of being a good neighbor is to be neighborly. Paul challenged the Thessalonians to be neighborly, “to lead a quiet life, to attend to our own business, and to work with our own hands” (v.11). To lead a quiet life doesn’t mean to avoid your neighbors or to refrain from conversation or developing relationships. It means not to draw negative attention to ourselves, not to be trouble-makers, because people are watching. Attending to our own business means don’t be meddlers who poke their noses into other people’s business. Working with our own hands means to be independent from others financially, to work and take care of our own needs, so that we don’t become a drain on others (v.12). People typically don’t mind helping others once in a while, but no one likes having to give money, food, or other supplies on a constant basis. Being neighborly helps the Gospel message; it is appealing to those around us. Being a poor, irritating neighbor undermines the Gospel’s effectiveness.

The purpose of Paul’s instruction was to encourage the Thessalonians to have a good name in the community so that the message of the Gospel would be helped and not hindered. The Thessalonians were convinced that Jesus was coming any day, so many of them stopped working (2 Thess. 3:7-14) and, thus, became a burden on others rather than a blessing to others. We must be aware at all times that people are watching us and listening to us, especially non-believers who know that we are Christians. They are paying attention to how we act and react, associating our behavior with Christ and Christianity. We must be careful of our words and works, that we are helping and not hindering the cause of Christ.

<sup>13</sup> “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. <sup>14</sup>For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. <sup>15</sup>For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup>For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup>Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup>Therefore, comfort one another with these words.”

## Those Who Are Asleep

*The Rapture of the Church*

### Leading Idea

*Whether we are dead or alive, Jesus will return for us and we will forever be with Him.*

Evidently, during Paul’s brief stay in Thessalonica, he had time to discuss the return of Jesus. In fact, the Thessalonians were convinced that the Second Coming was so imminent that many of them stopped working to wait for Him (2 Thess. 3:7-11). It also appears that there was confusion in regard to those who died before Jesus returned. It was thought that they might miss getting to participate in that glorious event. Thus, Paul included in his letter some clarification for their comfort (v.18).

First, Paul referred to Christians who have died as “those who are asleep” (v.13; John 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 51; 2 Peter 3:4). That is why we bury our loved ones in a cemetery, which is the Greek word for “sleeping place.” However, though we humans view death as final, God views death as temporal, as one taking a nap (see Jesus’ response to the death of Jairus’ daughter, Matt. 9:24). The Creator of life can simply recreate life with a spoken word as someone would speak to awaken another from his slumber. Every night when we go to sleep, we symbolize death; when we wake up, we symbolize resurrection. God will resurrect all deceased Christians as if they were simply asleep.

Because of this truth -- that those who are dead are simply “asleep” and will be awakened to see the return of Jesus -- then “we who are alive and remain” can be hopeful. We do not need “to grieve as the rest (non-Christians) who have no hope” (v.13). Though the body is dead or “asleep” the soul is with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8; Luke 23:43). Paul wrote to the Philippians that “to die is gain,” because he would get to be with Jesus, which is far better than living here on earth. Unfortunately, the world’s view of death is the other way around. Death is viewed in a negative light, but Christians view death in a positive light. Death is simply the door through which we must pass to be with God in heaven.

So then, what will happen to the bodies of those who are “in Christ” but who have gone before us in death? Their bodies will be resurrected when Jesus returns (v.14, 15). This information was new, previously hidden or untold; Paul said that he received it “by the word of the Lord” (v.14). When Jesus returns for His followers (the Bride, the Church, John 11:24; 14:1-3; 1 Cor. 15:51, 52), “the dead in Christ will rise first” (v.16). After those who have died are resurrected, then “we who are alive and remain “will be caught up together with them in the clouds” (v.17). Here, then, is the beginning of the fulfillment of our eternal life, for “we shall always be with the Lord” (v.17).

Several details should be noted here. First, Jesus “will descend from heaven” (v.16). This description coincides with what the angels told His followers at His ascension, that He would return in the same way as He left (Acts 1:9-11). Second, Jesus returns with a shout, with a voice of an archangel (Michael, Gabriel?), and with a trumpet, very much like a king or bridegroom would arrive (Matt. 25:6). These announcements will be loud and public, but will everyone hear them and see them or will this event be just for the people of God?

Third, Paul wrote that “the dead in Christ” will rise (v.16). What happens to those unbelievers who are left behind? They will remain and endure God’s wrath which will be poured out upon the earth (seven seals of Revelation). In the end, all unbelievers will be resurrected for judgment and final sentencing (Rev. 20:5).

When does this Rapture (meaning “caught up” or “snatched away,” Acts 8:39; 2 Cor. 12:2, 4) take place – before, during, or after God’s judgment of the world? See the next page. While no man knows the timing, we must not miss the point. It will take place! The fact that it will happen should encourage our hearts. While it is acceptable to be sad when we lose a loved one (John 11:35-44), because Christ defeated death, we can have hope that we will too (1 Cor. 15:22). Whether we are dead or alive, Jesus will return for us and we will forever be with Him.

## Four Views of the Rapture

Each of these views revolves around the Seven-Year Tribulation, that period in which God pours out His wrath on the earth.

*Pre-Tribulation Rapture*  
Christ's followers will be snatched away before the Tribulation occurs.

*Post-Tribulation Rapture*  
Christ's followers will be snatched away after the Tribulation occurs.

*Mid-Tribulation Rapture*  
Christ's followers will be snatched away in the middle of the Tribulation (halfway through).

*Pre-Wrath Mid-Tribulation Rapture*

Christ's followers will endure part of the Tribulation but not the wrath of God (at the three-fourths point).

**When Will It Happen?**  
“For I do not want you to be uninformed of this mystery... that a partial hardening has happened to Israel **until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in...**”  
*Romans 11:25*

Andy Woods  
*Seven Reasons to Trust the Pre-Trib View*

## Timing of the Rapture

*My Personal View*

The timing of the Rapture is a hotly-debated topic, and proponents of each view use Scripture to support their position. Since the future is a mystery to us, no one can claim to know the exact timing of these events, but that is okay. Christians must agree to disagree. Our differing eschatological views are not worth dividing the Church. Our focus should be on the fact that Jesus will return for His followers. Thus, we should always hold loosely to the exact sequence of when or how it will happen.

Having said that, I have my own view of how the Rapture fits into the end times. It is not unique to me; rather it is one of the four commonly-held views of the last days (see margin). I believe that the Rapture will occur before the Tribulation. Thus, the Church will not endure the wrath of God. Here are my reasons and Scriptural support for holding this view.

First, the Church is not a new Israel. Israel and the Church are two separate groups on two separate tracks. Prophecies either relate to the Church or to Israel. The confusion comes with knowing which group is mentioned in a prophecy. The Tribulation period concerns the nation of Israel (*Jer. 30:7; Dan. 9:24; 12:7*). Why would the Church endure a tribulation meant for the nation of Israel?

Second, there is no reference to the Church in the end times (*Revelation 4-22*). There are three parts of the Revelation – the things that were, that are, and that will take place (*1:19*). The word for the Church (*ekklesia*) is used 19 times in *Revelation 1-3* but it's not used once in the following chapters. Why not? The Church is absent. Remember, this Tribulation is meant for Israel (*Rev. 7, 11, 12*). Also, the Church is described as seven lamps (*1:20*); later those lamps are seen located in heaven (*4:5*).

Third, the Church is promised an exemption from divine wrath (*1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rom. 5:9; Rev. 3:10; 6:16, 17; 11:18; 15:1, 7; 16:19*). When does the wrath of God begin? God's wrath begins at the breaking of the seven seals (Anti-Christ, war, famine, death, martyrdom, etc., *Rev. 6*). We do endure life's tribulations but we will not endure the Tribulation.

Fourth, because the Church will be spared God's outpouring of wrath on the earth, this view is a comfort to believers (*John 14:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:18*). None of the other views of the Rapture provide that comfort. Can you imagine telling believers, “You will endure the wrath of God and then be snatched away; therefore be comforted by these things”?

Fifth, the Rapture is imminent (*James 5:8; 1 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:20*). It could happen any time. If the Rapture is in the middle or at the end of the Tribulation, then it would not be imminent. Only the Pre-Tribulation view is consistent with the immanency of Christ's return for His followers.

Sixth, the Anti-Christ cannot come to power until the Restraint is removed from the earth (*2 Thess. 2:6, 7, 9*). Who is the Restraint? The Holy Spirit restrains evil on the earth for now. Once the Spirit is “removed” (restraining presence) and the Church is raptured, evil incarnate can rise to power. God's indwelling Spirit resides in His people. When His people are caught away then evil will be unleashed.

Finally, there are pictures or types of the Rapture throughout Scripture. For example, Enoch was “snatched away” to heaven before the flood. Noah and his family were saved from the wrath of God in the ark (*Luke 17:26, 27; 2 Peter 2:5-9*). Lot and his family were removed before Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed (*Luke 17:28-30*). Daniel is absent before Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace ordeal (*Dan. 3*). In that story, everyone bowed before a world-conquering figure (Anti-Christ), including the Jews (Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-nego). They were threatened to be thrown into a furnace heated seven times hotter (Tribulation), yet Daniel is absent from the scene (the Church).

While there are great scholars on all sides of this issue, I am convinced that the Pre-Tribulation position is the most consistent with Scripture.

## The Day of the Lord

*God's Future Wrath and Judgment*

### Leading Idea

*Only those who walk in darkness need to fear the Day of the Lord.*

<sup>1</sup> “Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. <sup>2</sup>For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup>While they are saying, “Peace and safety” then destruction will come upon them suddenly, like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

<sup>4</sup>But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief, <sup>5</sup>for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness, <sup>6</sup>so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. <sup>7</sup>For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. <sup>8</sup>But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love and as a helmet the hope of salvation.

<sup>9</sup>For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>10</sup>who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.

<sup>11</sup>Therefore, encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.”

As Paul finished addressing the rapture of the Church (4:13-18), he transitioned to what would take place next – the Day of the Lord (v.2). Note the word “now” (v.1). It was his way of introducing a new topic. What exactly is the “Day of the Lord”? The phrase “Day of the Lord” captures multiple events that take place in the end times – the pouring out of God’s wrath on the earth and unbelievers, the end of the Tribulation or judgment of Israel, the return of Christ, and more. Old Testament prophets used the phrase 19 times for divine judgments in their day. The phrase is used four times in the New Testament (*Acts 2:20; 2 Thess. 2:2; 1 Peter 3:10*).

In connection with Paul’s description of the Rapture (4:13-18), the Day of the Lord seems to summarize all that will happen after the Church is gone. Thus, Paul wrote, “As to the [end] times and epochs (seasons), you have no need of anything to be written to you” (v.1). Though the subject of the end times is intriguing, Paul did not view it as necessary to include it in his letter, since Christ-followers would not endure it. However, the absence of it in Paul’s first letter sparked such an interest the Thessalonian Christians requested that he provide more details in his second letter.

Evidently, the Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, like a “thief in the night” (v.2). Though the leaders of that day will attempt to comfort the people of the earth with “peace and safety,” they will be rattled with sudden destruction, like a pregnant mother is caught off guard by sharp labor pains (v.3). Though many on earth will attempt to avoid this peril, “no one will escape.” God’s judgment of the earth for the sins of men will be all-inclusive and thorough (*1 Peter 3:10*).

Despite the terrible thought of that day’s events, Paul assured the Thessalonians that they had no need to worry. “But you, brethren, are not in darkness that *the day* would overtake you...” (v.4). “The day” refers to the Day of the Lord (v.2). Christians do not need to fear the Day of the Lord because it will not apply to them. It will only apply to those who are walking in darkness, godless unbelievers. God’s people do not walk in darkness but rather they are “sons of light” and “sons of day” (v.5). At the point of salvation, the Lord rescued us from Satan’s domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son (*Col. 1:13; Eph. 5:8*). We are now “sons of light” (*John 12:36; Phil. 2:15*).

Since the followers of Christ are “not of the night, nor of darkness” (v.5), we should stand out or be different or set apart from them. In Paul’s words, “let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober” (v.6). The words “alert and sober” are the opposite of being asleep and drunk (v.7). Those who are asleep or drunk (the unconverted) are prone to fall for temptation, deception, and enslavement; but, we who are the sons of light are awake, aware of the dangers of this fallen world. In fact, Paul wrote, that we protect ourselves with spiritual armor, like the “breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of salvation” (v.8; *Eph. 6:10-18*), to battle the flaming arrows of our enemy (*Eph. 6:16*).

Because we are children of light and not sons of darkness, Paul wrote that “God has not destined us for wrath but for obtaining salvation through Christ...” (v.9). To what wrath was Paul referring? Certainly, because of Christ, we will escape eternal wrath or separation from God in the lake of fire. However, given the context of the passage, it is more likely that Paul was referring to the Day of the Lord, His outpouring of wrath on the unbelievers of the earth. The wrath of that day is reserved for those who walk in darkness. Therefore, it will not apply to those who are children of light.

Thus, the Day of the Lord will not affect those who are called the “sons of day.” We have no need to fear. “Whether we are awake (alive) or asleep (passed away), we will live together with Him” (v.10). Here is a flashback to Paul’s mention of the rapture (4:13-18). These words were meant to be an encouragement to the believers of that day (v.11). May they also be an encouragement to us.

<sup>12</sup> “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, <sup>13</sup> and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. <sup>14</sup> We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. <sup>15</sup> See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seeks after that which is good for one another and for all people. <sup>16</sup> Rejoice always; <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing. <sup>18</sup> In everything give thanks for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit; <sup>20</sup> do not despise prophetic utterances. <sup>21</sup> But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; <sup>22</sup> abstain from every form of evil.”

## Live in Peace With One Another

*Church Unity – A Call to Action*

### Leading Idea

*Church unity does not fall to leaders alone; it is the responsibility of all believers.*

After his section on the return of Christ (4:13-5:22), Paul addressed a potential problem in the church. His commands seem disjointed and confusing at first, until they are viewed in the context of his second letter (2 Thess. 3:6-13). Evidently, there were people who stopped working to wait for Christ to return. Without a job, they couldn’t provide for themselves and depended on others. In their idleness, they became undisciplined and unruly. They acted like busybodies but only caused trouble. As a result, they sparked a disruption in the assembly. This situation is the backdrop for our passage.

To start, Paul affirmed the authority and efforts of the church’s leaders (v.12, 13). It is assumed that Paul was referring to Elders. Of the two offices that Paul established (the other being Deacons, Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3), Elders were given the role of church oversight, to ensure that the congregation was protected from internal and external dangers. Because their role is vital to the church, Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to “appreciate” and “esteem them.” Notice Paul’s words. He described them as those who “diligently labor” and to esteem them “because of their work.” To the idle, Paul was hinting that work was valuable and that submission to Elder authority was essential for unity (Heb. 13:7, 17).

But, unity does not fall to the Elders alone. It’s the responsibility of all believers. Paul followed, “We urge you, brethren...” (everyone) with a rapid fire list of short statements to *promote the peace* among them. First, “admonish the unruly” (v.14), speaking of the lazy trouble-makers. To admonish means to warn, counsel, or teach. We should confront ungodly behavior in a gentle, loving manner. Second, Paul wrote to “encourage the fainthearted” and “help the weak” (v.14), which may refer to the same people. The fainthearted and weak could also be anyone struggling spiritually, emotionally, morally, socially, financially, etc. In order to build a bridge of peace and unity in a church, we must strengthen all of its member parts. Third, “be patient with everyone” (v.14). Everyone is at a different level of spiritual maturity; therefore, we can’t expect for all members to speak or act in mature ways. Just as we would want others to tolerate our shortcomings, so we must tolerate the shortcomings of others.

Fourth, Paul wrote, “See that no one repays another with evil for evil...” (v.15). Nothing upsets the peace in a church more quickly than retaliation for an offense. The Lord expects us to practice forgiveness, not to overlook offenses but to endure them without escalation. We turn the other cheek. When we seek revenge, hold a grudge, or harbor anger, we promote disunity. Although we should confront ungodly behavior, we must take steps to heal not hurt relationships with believers.

Fifth, Paul wrote to “rejoice always” (v.16). We must not allow anything to steal our joy, not even people; our joy is found in Christ, not in people or circumstances. Sixth, “pray without ceasing” (v.17). Paul was not suggesting that we pray in place of work; rather we should be prayerful about everything. Next, “in everything give thanks” (v.18). We tend to dwell only on the negative things, when we should focus on the goodness of God in all things. Gratitude helps nurture a positive, peaceful attitude.

Then, Paul said, “Do not quench the Spirit” (v.19). In context, quenching the Spirit would mean allowing anything to be said or done in the church that would be a roadblock to His presence or power. When believers are not at peace with one another, they are rarely at peace with God. Therefore, the Spirit is not free to work or move in the lives of the people or to use them as effective ambassadors.

Finally, Paul warned the Thessalonians to protect the truth. “Do not despise prophetic utterances” (v.20), which means that we should be respectful and patient with people who claim to have a word from God or claim that He is working in their life. However, we must not take everything we hear or see as from God; rather we must “examine everything carefully” (v.21) through Scripture. The Bible is our filter. We should only “hold fast to what is good” and “abstain from every form of evil” (v.22).

<sup>23</sup> “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup>Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. <sup>25</sup>Brethren, pray for us. <sup>26</sup>Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. <sup>27</sup>I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. <sup>28</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

## Three In One

*The Closing to Paul's Letter*

### Leading Idea

*We serve a faithful God who will complete the work that He started.*

In this passage, Paul does a masterful job wrapping up the major themes of the second half of his letter (4:1-5:22) – sanctification, the Second Coming, and church unity. First, in regard to sanctification (v.4:1-12), that process in which God is conforming us into the image of His Son, Paul wrote “May the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely...” (v.23). Notice that we do not sanctify ourselves but rather God does the sanctifying. He is the faithful One who “calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” (v.24; *Phil. 1:6*). The Lord will complete His work in us, not on earth as some believe, but upon His return (*1 John 3:2*); and His work will be complete, “without blame in spirit, soul, and body.”

Here Paul separated the immaterial part of us into two facets – spirit and soul. This separation has given rise to a healthy debate over whether or not we are two-part or three-part beings. Those who hold to the two-part theory (material and immaterial) use spirit and soul synonymously. Those who hold to the three-part theory do so because it best reflects the fact that man was made in the image of God – a three-part Being. Thus, they believe that the spirit is that part of man which relates to God. The soul is that part which relates to self – mind, will, and emotions; and the body is that part which relates to others.

Second, Paul made his fourth reference to the return of Christ when he said, “May the God of peace sanctify you entirely... at the *coming* of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.23). It is clear that he wanted to emphasize the truth that Jesus will return for His followers. It is also possible that the next line related to the Second Coming – “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” – the “it” being the return of Christ. If we believe that Jesus was God’s Son, if we believe that He lived a sinless life, if we believe that He could not lie, and if we believe that Jesus died, rose again, and ascended into heaven, then it cannot be difficult for us to believe that He will return just as He said.

Third, in regard to church unity or peace, which was the last topic he addressed (5:12-22), notice that Paul inserted that “the God of *peace*” would sanctify them (v.23). God is a God of peace and He expects His followers not only to be at peace with Him but to be at peace with each other. Paul followed up with “pray for us, greet all the brethren with a holy kiss, and read this letter to all the brethren” (v.25-27). Prayer is a unifying force. The holy kiss was a cultural greeting, much like hand-shaking is in our country; some countries still use a kiss (on the cheek) as a greeting today. The point here is not the kiss but that Paul commanded that they should kiss “all the brethren,” meaning leave no one out. Finally, Paul adjured the Thessalonians (which means to promise under oath) to share his letter with everyone. Here is another unifying force, when all believers sit under the reading or teaching of God’s Word.

Because Paul asked that his letter be read in the church equates his writing to Scripture, the Word of God. To share Paul’s letter may mean to make sure everyone in the church gets to read it or hear it read, or it may mean to copy it and share it with other churches in the region. No doubt this is how we have a remaining copy of Paul’s letter today, as it was handed down from generation to generation and circulated among the believers.

Paul opened and closed his letter by mentioning grace. He opened with “Grace to you and peace” (1:1) and he closed with “The grace of our Lord be with you” (5:28). The grace of God was a common theme of Paul’s life. He mentioned it regularly. “I am what I am by the grace of God,” he wrote to the Corinthians (*1 Cor. 5:10*). We must never claim praise or glory for ourselves, as we are not self-made in the spiritual sense; rather we are what we are by the grace of God. We must never forget it. Thus ends Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, a glowing report of their faithfulness and love and a reminder of not only what God is doing in us and through us but also that He will someday return for us.