

FIRST THESSALONIANS

It is generally supposed that Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians is the first book of the New Testament that was ever written.¹ The Epistle, therefore, provides us with an insight into the spirit of the early church, especially in the churches that were formed by converted gentiles, that is lacking in Epistles that date from the decades following the great event of Pentecost.

In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Leon Morris observes in his Preface: "The Epistles to the Thessalonians are all too little studied today. It may be true that they lack the theological profundity of Romans and the exciting controversy of Galatians; but nevertheless their place in Scripture is an important one. No other writing of the great apostle provides a greater insight into his missionary methods and message. Here we see Paul the missionary and Paul the pastor, faithfully proclaiming the gospel of God, 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. Though the continuous exposition of great doctrines is not a characteristic of the Thessalonian writings yet it is fascinating to see how most, if not all, of the great Pauline doctrines are present, either by implication or direct mention. When we consider the undoubtedly early date of these letters this is a fact of importance in the history of Christian thought."

Attestation and Authorship:

Few Bible scholars doubt the fact that Paul is the author of this epistle, not only because it bears his name but also because of the contents of the letter. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* writes the following about this epistle: "The epistle claims to be written by Paul (1 Thess 1:1; 2:18). Paul's character shines out from this epistle. Note his anxiety for the believers' welfare (3:1-2), his earnest desire for their spiritual edification (3:8-11), his compassion toward them (2:7), and his sympathy with those in distress (4:13,18). External evidence is found in Marcion, who accepted it into his canon. It is found also in the Old Syriac and the Old Latin versions. The Muratorian Canon catalogs it sixth in the list of Pauline epistles. Irenaeus first refers to it by name in *Against Heresies* 5.6.1. Tertullian also quotes it as 'written by the Apostle.' Clement of Alexandria seems to be the first to ascribe it to Paul in *Instructor* 1.5. Thenceforth references to it are numerous."

Date and Place of writing:

It seems safe to assume that the Epistle was written in Corinth in 52 or 53 AD. *The Pulpit Commentary* gives us the following pertinent information: "When Paul and Silas left Thessalonica, they came to Berea; Timothy probably remained behind, but he also soon joined them. Paul left them both at Berea, and proceeded alone to Athens. Timothy was probably sent from Berea back to Thessalonica to confirm the Church there, though some suppose that this mission took place from Athens. At Athens Paul intended to remain until his companions joined him; he sent a message to Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed (Acts xvii. 14, 15). It would, however, appear that he left Athens without them; unforeseen circumstances had prevented them complying with his request, and they did not rejoin him until his arrival at Corinth. Now, as the Epistle is written in the joint names of Paul, Silvanus, and Timotheus, it is evident that it was not composed until all three met together at Corinth. Some time also must have elapsed between the planting of Christianity in Thessalonica and the writing of this Epistle. Paul had twice attempted to visit them; Timothy had been sent by the apostle and had returned from his mission; and the faith of the Thessalonians had been spread abroad throughout Macedonia and Achaia (ch. i. 7,8). The interval, however, could not have been long. Timothy returned at the commencement of Paul's residence at Corinth; and the apostle's anxiety for the Thessalonians would induce him to write the Epistle immediately on his receiving the information. He speaks of his absence from them as having as yet lasted only a short time. 'We, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored the more abundantly to see your face with great desire' (ch. ii. 17). We may, therefore, safely fix the time of the composition of the Epistle toward the close of the year 52 or the beginning of the year 53, and during the early part of Paul's residence at Corinth, about six months after the planting of Christianity in Thessalonica."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary favors a slightly earlier date. We read: "Thanks to Luke's penchant for historical details, the dates of these letters may be fixed with reasonable certainty. Luke's reference to

¹ *The Pulpit Commentary* mentions the Epistle of James that may be the earliest book in the NT.

Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, in connection with Paul's sojourn at Corinth (Acts 18:12) has been illuminated by the discovery at Delphi of an inscription which dates Gallio's proconsulship within the reign of the emperor Claudius. The inscription seems to indicate that Gallio assumed office in the summer of A.D. 51. Since Luke apparently suggests that Paul had stayed in Corinth about eighteen months before Gallio came to power (Acts 18:11), the apostle probably arrived in Corinth early in A.D. 50. Not long after this, Silas and Timothy returned from Macedonia with the report which issued in Paul's writing 1 Thessalonians (Acts 18:5; 1 Thess 3:1-6) probably about the middle of A.D. 50. A few months later 2 Thessalonians followed, in response to reports that certain problems were not yet solved."

Historical Background:

From *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* we gather the following information about Thessalonica: "Located on the great road (Via Egnatia) that connected Rome with the whole region N of the Aegean Sea, Thessalonica was an invaluable center for the spread of the gospel. In fact it was nearly, if not quite, on a level with Corinth and Ephesus in its share of the commerce of the Levant. The apostle Paul's ministry in Thessalonica fit his urban strategy-his effort to reach the empire through its cities. The circumstance noted in 17:1, that here was the synagogue of the Jews in this part of Macedonia, evidently had much to do with the apostle's plans and also doubtless with his success. The first scene of the apostle's work at Thessalonica was the synagogue (17:2-3). The modern city Salonika is a strategic Balkan metropolis having a population of more than 400,000. Because of its position it played a vital role in the First and Second World Wars. As a result of German occupation during World War II, the city lost about all its Jewish population. Because the modern city covers the site of the ancient city, little can be seen of NT Thessalonica. Remains of the ancient agora are visible in the center of modern Thessalonica, however."

Thessalonica was the second city in Macedonia Paul visited on his second missionary journey. He arrived there after the dramatic experience in Philippi from which he and Silas had been expelled. He started his three-week campaign in the synagogue and found some response among the Jews but mainly among the Greek. Luke tells us in Acts: "Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women."² An ensuing riot cut short their stay and the believers helped Paul and Silas to escape the city by night.³ There does not seem to be any indication that Paul ever visited the church again. The church was planted in the three-week period recorded by Luke and all other ministry by the apostle was done in writing. Two of the converts of the church accompanied Paul on his later travels: Aristarchus and Secundus. Luke reports that they originated from Thessalonica.⁴

Adam Clarke's Commentary observes: "Who the persons were who formed the apostolic church at Thessalonica is not easy to determine. They were not Jews, for these in general persecuted the apostle and the Gospel in this place. We are therefore left to infer that the church was formed, 1. of Jewish proselytes, called, Acts 17:4, devout Greeks. And 2. of converts from paganism; for, on the preaching of the Gospel to them, it is said, 1 Thess 1:9, that they turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God." It is especially the non-Jewish flavor of this epistle that makes it such a pertinent document for us.

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary gives the following outline of the epistle:

I.	Paul's Personal Reflections on the Thessalonians	1:1--3:13
	A. Paul's Praise of Their Growth	1
	B. Paul's Founding of the Church	2:1-16
	C. Timothy's Strengthening of the Church	2:17--3:13
	1. Satan Hinders Paul	2:17-20
	2. Timothy's Visit	3:1-5
	3. Timothy's Encouraging Report	3:6-10
	4. Paul's Desire to Visit Them	3:11-13
II.	Paul's Instructions to the Thessalonians	4:1--5:28
	A. Directions for Growth	4:1-12
	B. Revelation Concerning the Dead in Christ	4:13-18

² Acts 17:4

³ See Acts 17:5-10

⁴ See Acts 20:4

C. Description of the Day of the Lord	5:1-11
D. Instruction for Holy Living	5:12-22
E. Conclusion	5:23-28

The Text:

I. Paul's Personal Reflections on the Thessalonians	1:1--3:13
A. Paul's Praise of Their Growth	1:1-10

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

2 We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.

3 We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,

5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia-your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it,

9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

The opening address is typical of all of Paul's epistles. The name of the sender or senders is stated, followed by the addressee and a greeting. Luke confirms that Silas and Timothy joined Paul while he was in Corinth.⁵ If this epistle was written from Corinth, as is supposed above, their presence is confirmed in the mentioning of their names here. It may be that Paul dictated the letter and that either of his companions functioned as secretary. It is obvious, however, that the content of the epistle is Paul's.

Silas was Paul's travel companion on his second missionary journey. He replaced Barnabas. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* calls him a "Hellenistic Jew, ... [who] appears to have been a Roman citizen ([Acts] 16:37). The *Commentary* quotes Ramsay who wrote: "The choice of Silas was, of course, due to his special fitness for the work, which had been recognized during his ministration in Antioch. Doubtless he had shown tact and sympathy in managing the questions arising from the relations of the Gentile Christians to the Jews." This last observation is based on the fact that Silas was chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch to convey the decision the Synod of Jerusalem had reached regarding the position of gentile converts.⁶

Timothy is the better known of Paul's travel companions, mainly because more is written about his conversion and because of the fact that we possess the two epistles Paul wrote to him at a later date. He appears to have been a convert of the Apostle at his visit to Lystra during his first missionary journey.⁷ He was a half-Jew, his father being Greek. Of the three men who put their signature on this epistle only Paul is one hundred percent Jewish. The fact that one half of Paul's team was non-Jewish is representative for the tone and character of this epistle. The early church was in the process of losing its Jewish character. Actually, this first letter in the New Testament written to a Christian church was almost entirely gentile oriented. For Silas, this must not have presented any problem. For Timothy, it confirmed the composition of his own life.

⁵ See Acts 18:1,5

⁶ See Acts 15:22

⁷ See Acts 16:1-3

But for Paul this must have been a difficult and highly emotional matter. In his Epistle to the Romans, he gives voice to his inward struggle by saying: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel."⁸ This does not mean that Paul did not pour the fullness of his love in Christ for his gentile brothers and sisters into this epistle.

In a way, Paul's address in this epistle is unique. All the other epistles are either addressed to the believers in a certain place ("To all in Rome who are loved by God"; "To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse"), or to the church at the location ("To the church of God in Corinth"; "To the churches in Galatia"). "To the church of the Thessalonians" gives the impression that the church belongs to the people. It is true that the words "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" are added but that refers more to the following blessing than to the preceding address.

It is considered to be a healthy missionary principle to plant churches in which the people feel that they belong to it and it belongs to them. Many of the believers in Thessalonica were originally proselytes. To them this must have meant a certain loss of their own identity and an adhering to the religion of another nation with which they had to identify themselves. Converts to Judaism became, in a sense, Jews, although they were never fully accepted as such by the born Jews. In becoming Christian and in recognizing Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, their own identity was restored to them. They were no longer guests in a Jewish synagogue, but they had become members of their own church.

The Tyndale Commentary observes about Paul's greeting: "Also peculiar to these Epistles is the phrase *in God the Father*, Paul's habit being to say 'in Christ'. The mention of the two Persons together is a striking, if incidental, indication of the oneness of the Father and the Son. Being *in* the Father and the Son is a way of expressing the closeness of the relationship linking the Thessalonian believers with their God."

The greeting "grace and peace to you" expresses beautifully the blend of blessing that combines Jew and gentile in the love of Christ. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes about these words: "Paul's characteristic greeting, grace and peace, combines Greek and Hebrew salutations enriched with theological significance. God's act of unmerited favor in Christ (grace) brings in its wake complete spiritual welfare (peace)." In our modern world, we have managed to hollow out our greetings to the point where they have become meaningless. Nobody takes "Good Morning" seriously enough to accept it as a blessing. We answer "Good" to "How are you?" even though we may be in deep turmoil and experience inner hurt. Our greetings have become the masks behind which we hide. Paul elevated the Hebrew *Shalom* and the Greek *charis* to a blessing of the Lord bestowed upon his readers.

Paul's prayer of thanksgiving for the church he addresses is common to all of his epistles with the exception of Second Corinthians and Galatians. In the case of the Thessalonian church Paul had found all kinds of reasons in the church itself for thankfulness. But even in cases where the Apostle had to reprimand, he would go beyond the problems and difficulties and thank God for the very fact that the people he wrote to were "in Christ."

In the light of Paul's personal experience, both in Philippi and in Thessalonica, it is wonderful to observe that Paul has only positive memories of the time he spent on the two places. Yet, in Philippi he had been beaten and imprisoned, and in Thessalonica, he had to flee for his life. But the only thing that matters and which is the cause of his deep joy is the fact that he left behind a living church in both places.

Paul's prayer of thanksgiving is all-inclusive. "Always" and "continuously" are an indication of the intensity and frequency of his intercession for this church. We may suppose that Paul does not use those words as a hyperbole but that this prayer filled his heart and mind.

The Greek word translated with "without ceasing" is *adialeiptos* which means "without let up." *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* notes: "In a non-Biblical papyrus it describes the annoying persistence of a cough."

Not all the members of this church were mature Christians. The majority must have been new converts. Yet, Paul speaks of "all of you" when he refers to the fruit of their faith, their labor of love, and their perseverance in hope.

We may safely assume that Paul had preached a message of justification by faith alone to this church. The result of this message was immediately put in practice in "work produced by faith." There never was any dichotomy between what the mouth confessed and what the hand produced. When the Holy Spirit brings a human being to life it is inevitable that that person demonstrates that he is spiritually alive.

⁸ Rom. 9:2-4

The Tyndale Commentary comments here: “In some of his writings, notably Romans and Galatians, Paul sets faith and works in sharp contrast. But the reason for this is to emphasize that salvation comes from faith and not at all from works, for ‘by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight’ (Rom. iii,20). But while he insists that salvation is all of God, he also insists that true faith is busy. For example, in Gal. v. 6, he speaks of ‘faith which worketh by love.’ So here he refers also to an activity which follows from the faith of the Thessalonians.”

Matthew Henry’s Commentary comments beautifully on the three points of “work of faith,” “labor of love,” and “hope” which Paul mentions as the reason for his joy. We read: “Their faith and their work of faith. Their faith he tells them (v. 8) was very famous, and spread abroad. This is the radical grace; and their faith was a true and living faith, because a working faith. Note, Wherever there is a true faith, it will work: it will have an influence upon heart and life; it will put us upon working for God and for our own salvation. We have comfort in our own faith and the faith of others when we perceive the work of faith. Show me thy faith by thy works, James 2:18.

Their love and labor of love. Love is one of the cardinal graces; it is of great use to us in this life and will remain and be perfected in the life to come. Faith works by love; it shows itself in the exercise of love to God and love to our neighbor; as love will show itself by labor, it will put us upon taking pains in religion.

Their hope and the patience of hope. We are saved by hope. This grace is compared to the soldier’s helmet and sailor’s anchor, and is of great use in times of danger. Wherever there is a well-grounded hope of eternal life, it will appear by the exercise of patience; in a patient bearing of the calamities of the present time and a patient waiting for the glory to be revealed. For, if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it, Rom 8:25.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes about the three factors mentioned: “The order is logical and chronological: faith relates to the past; love to the present; hope to the future.” It is true, of course, that faith stands at the beginning of all spiritual life. Our trust in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the basis of our salvation. But this does not mean that faith belongs exclusively to the past. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews contradicts this when he says: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”⁹ This verse links faith to hope in an inseparable way. It also makes faith the guiding factor in the present. It is better to say that faith is the foundation of our life, love is the motivation, and hope is the incentive. Jesus exemplified the essence of hope when, in the words of Hebrew, He “for the joy set before him endured the cross.”¹⁰

For Paul, the word “hope” stood for the expectation of the soon return of Jesus Christ from heaven. This hope is the exclusive right of Christians. Speaking about the pagan world, Paul said that they are: “without hope and without God in the world.”¹¹ For the Christian is reserved “the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”¹² Writing to Titus, Paul defines this hope by saying that we are: “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.”¹³

The hope of Christ’s return has waned and waxed in the church over the centuries. The pendulum has swung from left to right, from considering it a cop-out from oppressing circumstances to the only solution in times of great tribulation. The hope of Christ’s return should produce endurance in difficult circumstances. It should never be an excuse to shut down all activities and shrink from the responsibilities given to us. The hope should make us more zealous to serve our Lord. God wants us to be busy doing what He gave us to do, on the day of His return. Jesus said: “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the

⁹ Heb. 11:1 (NKJV)

¹⁰ Heb. 12:2

¹¹ Eph. 2:12

¹² Col. 1:27

¹³ Titus 2:13 (KJV)

master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.”¹⁴

Some people take the promise of Jesus’ return more seriously as they grow older. The rapture to them would, of course, be preferable to a deathbed, which may be the reason for this geriatric hope. The fact that death does not differentiate between young and old does not seem to enter the picture in this hope.

Regardless of age, the hope of Christ’s return, like the possibility of death, should be a realistic factor to keep in our field of vision as a checkpoint that evaluates the character of our actions in life. The general eschatological confusion has made it difficult for many Christians to keep their focus on the return of Christ, as a beacon for daily life. Yet, this was the incentive that governed the behavior of the first century believers.

The Christians in Thessalonica needed endurance. The riot that ensued after Paul’s preaching in the city must have put the believers under immense pressure. We know little about the further history of the church. But life would probably have been easier for many believers had they kept on identifying with the Jewish section of the population instead of professing faith in Christ. Persecution tends to bring either the best or the worst out of people. We find the healthiest churches often in places where the believers are under enormous pressure. The inhumane cruelty of Nazi concentration camps and of the Soviet Gulag has produced some of the rarest jewels of faith. Hope has, in every case, been a vital factor for all who survived. Those who gave up hope died. The hope of Jesus Christ ought to be the most invigorating factor in our lives.

Paul sees in the way the Thessalonian Christians responded to his preaching an indication of their divine election. Does he mean by this that the people who came to faith in Thessalonica were the objects of God’s irresistible grace, in the sense that Calvin teaches that doctrine? I do not think so. The Thessalonians, like every human being, had the option of rejecting God’s offer of salvation. We may never fully understand the mystery of why some people are more easily persuaded than others, but we can state for sure that no one is forced to be saved against his will. The Thessalonians believed in the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ because they wanted to. What Paul is saying is that the Holy Spirit, not only got His foot in the door, but He unleashed His power in an unprecedented way among the young converts.

God’s only elect is Jesus Christ. In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul explains that election and predestination are inseparably linked to the person of Christ. We read: “[God] chose us *in him* before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.”¹⁵ Through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, Paul’s hearers came under deep conviction of sin and their repentance brought them “in Christ,” making them the object of God’s election.

In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Leon Morris quotes Nygren about Paul’s mention that the Gospel came “in power”: “The gospel is not the presentation of an idea, but the operation of a power. When the gospel is preached...the power of God is at work for the salvation of men, snatching them from the power of destruction...and transferring them into the new age of life.”

Paul’s mention of his example and lifestyle, while he dwelt in Thessalonica, implies that he must have used his personal testimony to illustrate the message. The words “You became imitators of us and of the Lord” evoke the image of the fate of Paul and Silas in the prison of Philippi as well as the crucifixion of our Lord. It is important, especially for new believers, to understand that coming to Christ, usually, means the beginning of hardship, not the end of it. Our salvation does not take us out of the battle but it assures us of victory. As long as we are engaged with the enemy we are in danger of injury and even physical death. Christians do not even get the benefit of an armistice. Luther has said: “If Christ wore a crown of thorns, why should His follower expect only a crown of roses?” The easy life is reserved for those who are meant for the slaughter.

The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle in his poem *The Banner of the Cross* so beautifully expressed all this.

Life is courageously carrying forward a banner of war
through good and evil days
torn up, stained, sometimes almost fallen down.

¹⁴ Matt. 24:45,46

¹⁵ Eph. 1:4,5

One stumbles and is often wounded with many deep wounds.
No one who is able to bear arms will run for his life.

Life is not ... peace down here,
asking for an armistice:
Life is carrying the banner of the cross
into the hands of God.

The mystery of the Gospel lies in this strange paradox that “severe suffering” and “joy” are not incompatible. Paul says: “In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” He must have told the Thessalonians that their beatings and imprisonment in Philippi resulted in the birth of a vibrant church. And even in Thessalonica, Paul and Silas left a group of believers behind when they fled the city. Even death can be a cause for joy. When the brother of my friend in Holland who had helped a British pilot to escape during World War II, was led away to be shot by the Nazis, he sang the psalm verse “Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight.”¹⁶ When our grandson Travis died, his parents brought his sister and brother to his bedside and they sang the doxology together. None of this makes sense, apart from the presence of the Holy Spirit.

As Paul and Silas had become a model for the young believers, they in turn became the model for other Christians. The Gospel is meant to be seen as well as preached. Preaching that is not backed up by the living testimony of the preacher does indescribable harm. We seldom convince others by our words alone. We are only convincing if people can “smell” Christ in us. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”¹⁷ And people will only smell Christ when God can smell Christ in us. Our greatest power of persuasion is often beyond our control.

Young believers need models. During the first stages of our spiritual life, it is not uncommon to receive our spiritual nourishment from other Christians. Young Christians, like young children have to learn to feed themselves. They do this, initially, by being fed. But continuing to receive spiritual food through others, instead of through a personal eating of the Word of God, leads to an abnormal dependence. We will always need other believers for fellowship. But if we keep on needing them for food, we lack maturity.

Paul says: “You became imitators of us and of the Lord.” He expressed the same thought in his Epistle to the Ephesians: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.”¹⁸ Many Christians never get beyond the point of looking at Jesus as their Savior and Master. That He is, of course, and we should never cease acknowledging Him as such. But Jesus also ought to be our role model. That means that we have to pay close attention to the Gospel record about His life on earth as a human being. It is good to always ask ourselves the question “What Would Jesus Do?” The modern danger for young people is to merely wear a bracelet with *WWJD* without making it a habit to imitate Christ in the practical circumstances of life. Peter states this clearly in his First Epistle: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”¹⁹

How exhilarating it must have been for Paul to hear such good testimonies from other churches in Greece about the faith and conduct of the young church in Thessalonica. From Paul’s description of the way the believers (you turned to God from idols), we conclude that the majority of the church members were not Jews or proselytes but converted pagans. In Luke’s record of the birth of the church in Thessalonica, we only read: “Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing

¹⁶ Ps. 43:4

¹⁷ II Cor. 2:14,15

¹⁸ Eph. 5:1

¹⁹ I Peter 2:21-23

Greeks and not a few prominent women.”²⁰ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “Luke, even if not stating explicitly the conversion of idolaters at Thessalonica, states what accords with it, the conversion of ‘not a few chief women,’ and the rising of a tumult instigated indeed by Jews, but carried on by others, which could not have reached such a height if the preaching had not reached the Thessalonian Gentiles.”

For people like me, who am born and raised in a Western society, it is hard to understand what it means to turn from idolatry to the living God. The very fact that Paul uses the term “living God” reduces the idols to dead entities. We should understand, though, that most idols are backed up by demonic powers. The expression “idol worship” evokes in us the wrong image. We borrow concepts from Christianity and Judaism to understand idol worship and we think of “worship” always in terms of comfort and hope. When people state that pagans are happy in their native religion, they project their own worldview on the pagans and totally ignore the fact that not all religions are equivalent to happiness. People who worship idols do so out of self-defense. Idol worship is a form of satanic blackmail. Demons put people in chains for the purpose of killing them. A person who turns from idol worship to serve the living God experiences this as a deliverance from slavery. Idolatry victimizes people. The conversion of an idol worshipper, therefore, is fundamentally different from the conversion of an agnostic or an atheist. The relief from guilt may be the same but usually the exuberance and joy of the idol worshipper sets him apart from all others who turn to the same Lord.

Our experience as missionaries to Stone Age tribespeople has taught us that man understands the dichotomy between God and Satan and that one cannot turn to God except when, at the same time, one severs the bonds with the enemy. Many people on the mission field of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, first burned their fetishes before committing themselves to hearing and accepting the Gospel message.

The act of the Thessalonians’ turning to God from idol worship became the catalyst to other cities in Macedonia. The other cities in which idol worship was practiced saw that, not only no disaster hit the city of Thessalonica when they threw away their idols but that they actually prospered. This broke the ban of fear that hung over them and gave them courage to do the same.

Two different tribes inhabit the Ilaga valley of Irian Jaya, Indonesia: the Damal and the Dani. The Damal were the first to burn their fetishes. The Dani hesitated. But when they saw that, for a whole year, no one died in the other tribe they took courage and followed the example of the others.

Idol worship and worship of the living God are worlds apart, not only because of the difference between light and darkness but also because of motivation. Idols and their demonic backings are served out of fear. This fear was accompanied by the bondage of sin. There is no such thing as enjoyment of sin. The thrill is temporary and leaves a bitter taste. Sin enslaves and dehumanizes. Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”²¹ Serving the living God means being His bond-slave, serving Him out of love.

In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Leon Morris states the following about the last two verses of this chapter: “First, they had turned away from idols, which must have been a very important part of the evidence of their conversion. In every age such action is a mark of the true Christian. Secondly, they had come to *serve the living and true God*. A negative attitude is not sufficient. The word rendered *serve* really means ‘serve as a slave’ and reminds us of the way in which Paul delighted to call himself a ‘slave of Jesus Christ’. It underlines the wholehearted nature of Christian service. Notice that God is spoken of as *living*, which contrasts with dead idols, and *true*, which means ‘genuine’ over against the shadowy and unreal. The conjunction of these two terms gives emphatic expression to Paul’s essential monotheism. Thirdly, they awaited the second advent. Today this doctrine is neglected in many quarters to our great loss, and its rediscovery is sorely needed; for as J. E. Fison says: ‘It is precisely that kind of conversion which the church as well as the world needs today, and which only the rediscovery of a living eschatological hope can produce.’”

Although it is true that there is a direct link between idolatry and demonism, idols are generally treated in the Bible as inert objects without spiritual significance. To the Corinthian church Paul wrote: “Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of

²⁰ Acts 17:4

²¹ John 8:34

pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.”²² But the Old Testament prophets mercilessly mocked people who made idols and worshipped them. Listen to Isaiah’s ire: “The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man’s fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, ‘Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.’ From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, ‘Save me; you are my god.’ They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, ‘Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?’ He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, ‘Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?’”²³

Jeremiah is not less sarcastic with: “For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good.”²⁴

Objectively, idols are nothing more than the material of which they are made. The thought that statues would have any real spiritual power is devilish propaganda. It is only when a human being has allowed a demon to enter the privacy of his soul that fetishes and statues become links to the unseen world of evil. The Thessalonians had done the only reasonable thing they could do when they were confronted with the Gospel: they turned away from their idols toward God. No one who has had any dealings with the power of darkness should hang on to its paraphernalia. And Christians who have not had any personal experiences with the enemy in such a direct manner do well not to put his pictures at places of honor in their homes.

The deliverance from spiritual bondage gave to the Christian life of the Thessalonians its radiance. Their expectation of the return of Christ gave it its vibrancy. The twenty centuries that have expired between Paul’s writing and our present day have almost erased the hope of Christ’s imminent return. Most Christians look forward to meeting the Lord when they enter the pearly gates and not in the clouds. Maranatha Christians are almost a phenomenon of the past. This accounts for the lack of vibrancy in the church’s testimony, as mentioned in the quotation from *The Tyndale Commentary*.

In the Gospels, Jesus always connects the expectation of His return with service. In Matthew’s Gospel we read: “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?”²⁵ The Parable of the Talents hinges upon the theme of serving the master.²⁶ And in Luke’s Gospel we read how Jesus defines the essence of servant-hood: “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the

²² I Cor. 10:19,20

²³ Isa. 44:12-20

²⁴ Jer. 10:3-5

²⁵ Matt. 24:45

²⁶ See Matt. 25:14-30

night.”²⁷ The expectation of Christ’s return is linked to accountability. The realization that we will be held responsible for what we do with our lives is the essence of our Christian testimony.

Paul packs a lot of theology in the last verse of this chapter. Christ’s return, His resurrection from the dead, and the judgment day are mentioned in the same breath. The subject of the sentence is still “the living and true God.” The incarnation is understood, although it is not mentioned here. But the resurrection would be impossible without the incarnation.

The faith of the Thessalonians consisted not only in their change of allegiance from idols to the living and true God but also in their conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. Their turning away from idols set them apart from their pagan culture; their acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God distinguished them from Judaism. And some of them may have been proselytes before they met Paul. Paul emphasized Jesus’ resurrection as proof of His divinity in all of his preaching. We see this in the samples of his sermons that Luke preserved for us in Acts. Paul’s first recorded sermon preached in Antioch centers upon the resurrection of Jesus.²⁸ In speaking to the philosophers of Athens, Paul mentioned the resurrection as proof of the coming judgment. He says: “For [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”²⁹

Speaking in court before the governor Felix, Paul, with the obvious intent to appeal to the pagan governor’s conscience, said: “I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.”³⁰ How personal this testimony became we read further into Luke’s account: “He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, ‘That’s enough for now! You may leave.’”³¹ Felix understood, evidently, clearly what the implications of the resurrection were.

All this is introductory to the actual message of the Gospel which is that Jesus rescues us from the coming wrath. Without a sense of accountability, man will not come to a conviction of sin. And without conviction of sin the need for forgiveness and atonement is not felt. God does not extend His pardon to those who feel they do not need it. Or rather, no one will consider God’s grace seriously without the realization that one is lost without it.

In writing to the Romans, Paul clarifies that it is the life of Jesus Christ in us that saves us on the day of judgment. We read: “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”³² Jesus’ life in us is the Holy Spirit. He is the Paraclete, our defense lawyer who takes our case on the Day of Judgment. This is also expressed on Paul’s glorious outburst elsewhere in Romans: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-more than that, who was raised to life-is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”³³

Adam Clarke’s Commentary ends its remarks on this chapter by emphasizing the importance of the testimony the Thessalonian Christians had acquired in their region. We read: “This was the news, the sounding out, that went abroad concerning the converted Thessalonians. Everywhere it was said: They have believed the Gospel; they have renounced idolatry; they worship the living and true God; they have received the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit; they are happy in their souls, unspotted in their lives, and full of joy;

²⁷ Luke 12:35-38

²⁸ See Acts 13:30-39

²⁹ Acts 17:31

³⁰ Acts 24:14-16

³¹ Acts 24:24,25

³² Rom. 5:9-11

³³ Rom. 8:31-34

expecting an eternal glory through that Christ who had died for and purged their sins, and who shall fashion their degraded bodies and make them like to his glorious body, and give them an eternal residence with himself in a state of blessedness.”

The same Commentary adds a note that should be understood against the background of the time in which it was written. The fact that we have moved out of the age of colonialism does not mean that the principle Clarke espoused is no longer valid. Whether colonialist, businessmen, or missionaries, we should understand that our lifestyle is more important than our words. Read Clarke’s words: “The mere preaching of the Gospel has done much to convince and convert sinners, but the lives of the sincere followers of Christ, as illustrative of the truth of these doctrines, have done much more: Truth represented in action seems to assume a body, and thus renders itself palpable. In pagan countries, which are under the dominion of Christian powers, the Gospel, though established there, does little good, because of the profane and irreligious lives of those who profess it. Why has not the whole peninsula of India been long since evangelized? The Gospel has been preached there; but the lives of the Europeans professing Christianity there have been, in general, profligate, sordid, and base. From them sounded out no good report of the Gospel; and therefore the Mohammedans continue to prefer their Koran, and the Hindus their Vedas and, Shasters, to the Bible. It should however be acknowledged, to the glory of God, that of late years a few apostolic men in that country are turning the tide in favor of the Gospel; and several eminent Europeans have warmly espoused the doctrine of Christ, and are laboring to circulate the word of God through the whole of British India.”

The expectation of Christ’s return has an immediate effect upon our lifestyle. No one expressed this more clearly than the Apostle John who wrote: “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”³⁴

The last word of this chapter is “wrath” which is the translation of the Greek word *orge*. *Strong’s Concordance* defines *orge* as a “desire (as a reaching forth or excitement of the mind), violent passion (ire, or [justifiable] abhorrence); by implication punishment.” The KJV renders it variously with: “anger, indignation, vengeance, wrath.” The Bible depicts God, on the one hand, as “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.”³⁵ But there is another side to God’s character that is particularly revealed to His creatures who reject His grace and love. God has, as the definition of *orge* suggests, an abhorrence of sin to the extent where He punishes the sinner with a violent passion. This makes the author of Hebrews exclaim: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”³⁶ John describes the reaction of God’s creatures to the wrath of God with: “Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.”³⁷ Only the fact that our names are written in the Book of Life rescues us from this coming wrath.

There is an eternity of difference between those whose names are written in the Book of Life and those who were never registered. The registration takes place when we turn to God and acknowledge our sins. The atonement of the cross enters our names immediately in God’s record. The Apostle Paul assures us that “the man who loves God is known by God.”³⁸ Jesus goes even farther by saying: “My Father will honor the one who serves me.”³⁹ Only the ones who are not recognized by God because they never recognized Him are the objects of His wrath. Jesus puts it this way in Matthew’s Gospel: “I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”⁴⁰ The most important thing in life is knowing God and being known by Him.

B. Paul’s Founding of the Church

2:1-16

³⁴ I John 3:3

³⁵ Ps. 103:8

³⁶ Heb. 10:31

³⁷ Rev. 20:11

³⁸ I Cor. 8:3

³⁹ John 12:26

⁴⁰ Matt. 7:23

- 1 You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure.*
- 2 We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.*
- 3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.*
- 4 On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.*
- 5 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed-God is our witness.*
- 6 We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.*
- As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you,*
- 7 but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.*
- 8 We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.*
- 9 Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.*
- 10 You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.*
- 11 For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children,*
- 12 encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*
- 13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*
- 14 For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews,*
- 15 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men*
- 16 in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.*

Paul's use of the word "failure" is interesting. Some people in Thessalonica may have thought that Paul's visit was a failure since he and Silas had to leave the city by night because of the rebellion their presence there had caused. We don't know how long Paul and Silas spent in Thessalonica. Luke mentions three Sabbath days.⁴¹ It may be that their stay was no longer than three weeks. Since Paul had to perform manual labor while being there, his whole campaign may have consisted of only three Sabbath services. To leave a healthy church behind after such a short ministry is nothing less than a miracle. Paul's words: "our visit to you was not a failure" are, therefore, one of the great understatements in the Bible.

The tone of this chapter suggests that the events may have happened too fast for Paul himself. It took his breath away. After arriving in Berea, he must have sat down to evaluate his ministry and to ask himself if it had been worth it. Satan, probably, slipped up behind Paul to whisper in his ear that he was going too fast and that the miracle-tree he had planted would soon wither. This may be the reason Paul sits down here to take inventory and to evaluate.

It seems that, upon arrival in Thessalonica, Paul and Silas were still in shock after the treatment they had received in Philippi. The physical and emotional wounds inflicted upon them there had probably not yet healed. They may have felt that they needed some time off to recover and that it would be reasonable for them to let things settle and to have a little vacation in Thessalonica instead of another Gospel preaching campaign. As it turned out, God's prescription for the healing of the wounds of Philippi was to get Paul back into the pulpit in Thessalonica.

It also appears that the atmosphere in Thessalonica was hostile from the very beginning. Even before the riots that forced the team to flee broke out in the city, Paul faced strong opposition. We read: "With the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition." Paul and Silas were under great pressure both from within and without in the few short weeks they ministered in the city.

⁴¹ See Acts 17:2

Matthew Henry's Commentary observes: "The gospel of Christ, at its first setting out in the world, met with much opposition; and those who preached it preached it with contention, with great agony, which denoted either the apostles' striving in their preaching or their striving against the opposition they met with. This was Paul's comfort; he was neither daunted in his work, nor driven from it."

The phrase: "With the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel" is rather interesting. The NKJV follows the Greek word for word with the rendering: "We were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God."

The Tyndale Commentary states the following about this phrase: "Despite these troubles the apostolic band had preached boldly. The verb rendered *we were bold* is derived from two Greek words, *pas rthesis*, meaning 'all speech', so that basically it denotes a complete freedom of speech, and hence the feeling of being completely at home. This includes being without fear, and having complete confidence. It is difficult to find one English word which will express both these ideas, and usually our translations choose one and leave the other (though here Moffat says 'we took courage and confidence in our God'). In the New Testament the verb is always connected with the preaching of the gospel. Notice that here it is connected with in *our God* (an expression, incidentally, which is very characteristic of these two epistles), for Paul is not speaking of merely natural courage, but of the supernatural endowment with which God equips those who put their trust in Him."

The NIV uses the word "appeal" to translate the Greek *parakleesis*. Most older translations use "exhortation." *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* defines *parakleesis* as: "persuasive discourse, calling to one's side, for admonition, encouragement, or comfort." The word reminds us, of course, of *parakletos*, the name Jesus gave to the Holy Spirit. We get a picture of Paul, not merely, engaging in public preaching but in appealing to people individually to make a decision. About this kind of one-to-one ministry, Paul says that it did "not spring from error or impure motives" and that he was not "trying to trick [them]."

"Error" pertains to the question whether Jesus was the Messiah and whether His death meant atonement for the sins of the world or not. The Jewish opposition against Paul was based on the premise that the essence of Paul's message was false. They maintained, as orthodox Jews still do at present, that Jesus was not the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise and that His death on the cross did not mean the end of the Old Testament ceremonial law. If the Gospel is not objectively true, we have no business trying to persuade people to accept it. It is not a matter of its being true for some people and not for others. In Jesus' death on the cross, the sins of the whole world were either taken away, or they were not. In our world of subjective values, it is good to understand that the Gospel message presents us with an absolute.

"Impure motives" directs the beam of light from the message to the messenger. The thought that we can proclaim the truth but that our motives for doing so are wrong is frightening. It shows us how devious the human heart is. If we do the right thing for the wrong reasons we will not escape God's judgment. The situation is not always black-and-white. Our preaching may only be slightly tinged by the thought of a love offering, or by the prestige a certain pulpit may give us. Paul expressed the only pure motive for preaching when he wrote to the Corinthians: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."⁴² Obedience to God's call to preach has to be linked to a passion for souls. We need this for our own protection. No one is exempt from impure motives unless the Holy Spirit protects him.

The Tyndale Commentary explains that "nor are we trying to trick you," or "nor in guile" as is the reading of the KJV, points to "cunning craft: it properly signified catching fish with a bait, and thence came to mean any crafty design for deceiving or catching." The Bible wants us to treat our fellowmen as people whose privacy and personal responsibility we respect. There is no point in deceiving people with the truth. In our presentation of the Gospel we ought not to promise more than can be delivered. A message that states that all our troubles will end when we accept Jesus as our Savior is a false message. Usually our troubles only begin when we turn to God! We also deceive if we present Jesus only as Savior and not as Lord who lays claim to the totality of our lives. The Gospel does not promise life without surrender or blessing without obedience. The difference between being a fisher of fish and a fisher of men is in the fact that human beings surrender instead of being caught.

Paul hides some precious pearls in vs. 4. The call of God was upon his life. God had chosen him for the purpose of entrusting the Gospel message to him. He had a clear picture in mind of what God wanted him to do and to be. In the same way as God had entrusted the revelation of Himself to the people of Israel in

⁴² II Cor. 5:15

the Old Testament, so He entrusted the Gospel to the Apostles in the New. Israel's failure to be true to their trust is the main theme of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, Israel deviated from the path of God by acting as if God's covenant was ultimately only meant for them. The danger of preaching in the New Testament is that the preacher would cater to his audience instead of pledging total allegiance to the Lord. Preaching to please people is a very dangerous temptation. Paul always kept in mind that God would hold him responsible for what he did with the Gospel. To the Corinthians he wrote: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"⁴³ Elsewhere in the same epistle, he writes: "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."⁴⁴ Sometimes, though not always, serving God and serving man are incompatible. Therefore, the Apostle wrote to the Galatians: "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ."⁴⁵ *The Tyndale Commentary* observes here: "The point is that, while Paul served men, he did not live to serve them. His service was primarily service of God, and he delighted to refer to himself as 'the slave of God', or 'of Christ'."

Although this is not specifically mentioned, it is obvious that Paul had been accused of using shady means and ulterior motives in his ministry in Thessalonica. This is probably implied in the "strong opposition," mentioned earlier. The Jewish section of the city, as well as the group that had come over from Philippi had, obviously, tried to smear Paul with dirt. Having found nothing outwardly, they accused him of things that no one could verify. One of the problems Paul had to face was that the world was crawling with preachers whose main motive was to enrich themselves. The popularity of Judaism in a world of Greek philosophy made it easy for one to go around, upholding Biblical truth and raking in the money. For this reason, Paul made it a point to be self-supporting in every place he went. He needed financial independence in order to be free to speak the truth.

Adam Clarke's Commentary explains the following about the phrase: "As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you": "They had a right to their maintenance while they devoted themselves wholly to the work of the Gospel for the sake of the people's souls. Others understand the words en ... barei ... einai ..., to be honorable; we sought no glory of you nor of others, though we were honorable as the apostles of Christ. Kabowd ..., in Hebrew, to which the Greek baros ... corresponds, signifies not only weight but glory; and in both these senses the apostle uses it, 2 Cor 4:17."

The theme of financial support, which Paul declined, is a recurring one in his epistles. It is, therefore, logical to suppose that this is the intent of the Apostle's remarks here.

Matthew Henry's Commentary puts it well by saying: "He avoided ambition and vain-glory: Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you nor yet of others, v. 6. They expected neither people's purses nor their caps, neither to be enriched by them nor caressed, and adored, and called Rabbi by them. This apostle exhorts the Galatians (5:26) not to be desirous of vainglory; his ambition was to obtain that honor which comes from God, John 5:44. He tells them that they might have used greater authority as apostles, and expected greater esteem, and demanded maintenance, which is meant by the phrase of being burdensome, because perhaps some would have thought this too great a burden for them to bear."

Paul describes his feelings for the converts in Thessalonica as motherly and brotherly love in the sense in which the Apostle John defined it. John said: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."⁴⁶ Motherly love is based on instinct. Even in the animal world, we find examples of mothers who give their lives for their brood. But the brotherly love is based on the divine love that brought Jesus Christ to the cross. Paul uses two different words to describe both feelings. "We loved you so much," or as the KJV renders it, "being affectionately desirous of you," is the translation of the Greek *homeiromai* of which *Strong's Concordance* says that it is "found only in 1 Thess 2:8: [and that the meaning is] to have a kindly feeling, to long for (someone), to yearn for." The Greek word *agapetos* (related to *agape*) is used for "dear" in the phrase, "you had become

⁴³ I Cor. 9:16

⁴⁴ I Cor. 4:1-4

⁴⁵ Gal. 1:10

⁴⁶ I John 3:16

so dear to us.” People who share the Gospel with others must lay their lives on the line. We cannot preach with authority the message that “Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” if we don’t convey our willingness “to lay down our lives for our brothers.” This is the real meaning of the service of the Gospel. This attitude usually takes care of any slander and insinuation that people may try to spread about ministry of the Gospel. Jesus testified about Himself that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”⁴⁷ We cannot give our lives as a ransom but we can give it nonetheless.

In practical terms, Paul translated this in working for his own support while preaching the Gospel. Paul was the original tentmaker, according to Luke’s testimony. We read this when Paul meets Aquila in Corinth: “Because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.”⁴⁸

Paul comes back to the same theme in his second epistle to the same church. We read there: “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow.”⁴⁹ *The Tyndale Commentary* suggests that this was hard labor since the material used for making tents was leather.

From remarks made in his first epistle to the Corinthian church,⁵⁰ we gather that Paul had determined, from the very beginning of his Gospel ministry, that he was not free to ask for financial assistance from the churches he planted because of his past as a persecutor of believers. On the one hand, he wanted to atone for his sins of the past, on the other hand, he turned this into a positive advantage. Since he was financially independent, he could be “all things to all men so that by all possible means [he] might save some.”⁵¹

The only exception the Apostle allowed was for the church in Philippi. He wrote to them: “Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need.”⁵² In this, Paul showed a healthy balance. He was neither fanatic nor dogmatic about the principles he had set for himself. And the church in Philippi overruled the Apostle in this matter of financial support. They demonstrated a healthy spiritual insight in this matter that prompted Paul to set them as an example to other churches. “And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.”⁵³ Paul willingly sacrificed his principle for such a demonstration of “grace.” Their joy in giving was irresistible.

It may seem strange to us that Paul describes his own attitude in Thessalonica with the words “holy, righteous and blameless.” The fact that he does so without any reservation indicates two things. First, the preaching of the Gospel consists not only in a message of forgiveness of sin but also in a call to glory. Those who accept the Gospel should “live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” The second point is that holiness and righteousness are not the fruit of our own endeavor but of the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. I remember the story “Joe” which an officer of the Salvation Army once told at an open-air meeting. Joe worked in the machine room of a ship. His place was always the filthiest on board with grease and dirt all over. Once, while in a harbor, Joe heard the Gospel and accepted Christ as his Lord. The next day all the steel and brass in the machine room shone spotlessly. One of his shipmates came down

⁴⁷ Matt. 20:28

⁴⁸ Acts 18:3

⁴⁹ II Thess. 3:7-9

⁵⁰ See 1 Cor. ch. 9

⁵¹ I Cor. 9:22

⁵² Phil. 4:15,16

⁵³ II Cor. 8:1-5

and exclaimed: "Joe, what happened to you?" And Joe answered: "I got the glory!" Paul showed the people to whom he preached that he had got the glory.

The testimony of Paul's lifestyle and of his preaching convinced the people in Thessalonica that Paul's message was not his subjective philosophical opinion but the Word of God. Paul came to them as a prophet. All real preaching is prophetic. Preachers who base their words on the Bible are aware always of the fact that they handle stuff that is far above their own understanding. The fact that Paul based his arguments upon the Old Testament Scriptures, more than on his personal experience was convincing to them. Paul very rarely inserted personal experiences in his epistle and when he did, he did so reluctantly. To the Corinthians he wrote: "Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say."⁵⁴ The only written Word of God at Paul's disposal was the Old Testament. The New Testament was still being written while he preached. It is hard for us to imagine how to preach the Gospel effectively, only with the help of the Pentateuch and the Psalms, without the benefit of the four Gospels. But then Paul had personally met Matthew, Peter, and John, and he was familiar with the contents of the Gospels from their oral communications. For him the facts of salvation were not age old written documents but life experiences of people he knew. The combination of the written Word and the living Word is always convincing. This Word was at work in the Thessalonians.

In drawing a line from the church in Thessalonica to the church in Judea, Paul uses a strange comparison. Both churches had in common persecution by the same kind of people. Having been one of the persecutors himself, Paul knew what he was saying. The persecution in Thessalonica, however, did not come from the Jewish section of the population alone, although they had initially had something to do with it. The Thessalonian Christians were ostracized by their own families. In a paradoxical way, persecution has been the church's greatest stimulus throughout the ages. The Gospel is always sown in enemy territory and the adversary of God's children puts up a strong fight, thus stimulating the growth of the believers. The true Christian life is always subjected to stress. Jesus warned us about this when He said: "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!"⁵⁵

The persecution of the young church in Jerusalem is well recorded by Luke. We read in Acts: "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."⁵⁶ The story of the killing of the Lord Jesus covers a large part of the four Gospels. There is no record of Paul's expulsion from Judea. He may be referring here to situations such as happened in Thessalonica and other places where he and his companions had to flee for their lives.

Paul's mention of the Jewish opposition to the Gospel being preached to the Gentiles covers more than appears on the surface. *Barnes' Notes* clarifies this point as follows: "No particular instance is mentioned in the life of Paul previous to this, when they had formally commanded him not to preach to the pagan, but no one can doubt that this was one of the leading points of difference between him and them. Paul maintained that the Jews and Gentiles were now on a level with regard to salvation; that the wall of partition was broken down; that the Jew had no advantages over the rest of mankind in this respect, and that the pagan might be saved without becoming Jews, or being circumcised; Rom 2:25-29; 3:22-31; notes, Col 1:24. The Jews did not hold it unlawful 'to speak to the Gentiles,' and even to offer to them eternal life (Matt 23:15), but it was only on condition that they should become proselytes to their religion, and should observe the institutions of Moses. If saved, they held that it would be as Jews-either originally such, or such by becoming proselytes. Paul maintained just the opposite opinion that pagans might be saved without becoming proselytes to the Jewish system, and that in fact, salvation was as freely offered to them as to the children of Abraham. Though there are no express instances in which they prohibited Paul from speaking to the Gentiles recorded before the date of this Epistle, yet events occurred afterward which showed what were their feelings, and such as to make it in the highest degree probable that they had attempted to restrain him; see Acts 22:21-22, 'And he (Christ) said unto me (Paul), Depart, for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles.

⁵⁴ II Cor. 12:6

⁵⁵ Matt. 10:24,25

⁵⁶ Acts 8:1

And they (the Jews) gave him audience unto this word, and then lift up their voices and said, ‘ ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth, for it is not fit that he should live.’ ’ ”

A deeper reason for the animosity, however, must have been the Jewish fear that they would lose their position as guardians of God’s revelation in this world. This was the point of Jesus’ Parable of the Tenants of the Vineyard. In conclusion, Jesus said: “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.” Matthew records that it was this parable that made the priests and Pharisees decide to arrest and kill Jesus.⁵⁷ The Jewish nation had come to the point where they regarded the fact that God had chosen them as a vehicle for His revelation in this world as part of their national pride. This had blinded their eyes to the fact that God intended them to be a kingdom of priests: a bridge between Himself and the rest of humanity that was lost.

Paul wrote this epistle several years before the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. But his prophetic conclusion was that the measure of the sins of Israel was full and that the coming of the final judgment was merely a matter of time. Israel had come to the point where the inhabitants of Canaan were when God considered their sin had reached its full measure.⁵⁸

C. Timothy’s Strengthening of the Church 2:17--3:13

1. Satan Hinders Paul 2:17-20

17 *But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.*

18 *For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us.*

19 *For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you?*

20 *Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*

The words “we were torn away from you” refer to the hasty departure at night of Paul and Silas.⁵⁹ Paul uses a strong expression. The Greek word is *aporphanizo* from which our word orphan is derived. Paul, obviously, felt that his departure was premature and that the young church still needed his fatherly love and care. The opposition of the enemy forced the church to stand on its own feet before, in Paul’s opinion, those feet were strong enough to stand on. The church in Thessalonica would either have to learn to swim or they would sink. Some modern missionaries who were forced to leave their labor prematurely are able to strongly empathize with Paul. It is often difficult to discern that premature closures can be part of God’s strategic plan for His church. Yet, we either believe that God is in charge, or otherwise that Satan determines what happens in the Lord’s vineyard. Moses described God’s relationship with His people as an eagle and it’s young. He said: “He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions.”⁶⁰ It is God’s stirring up of the nest that bothers us. The mother bird throws its young out and seemingly allows them to fall to their death in order to teach them to fly. God does the same with His young and immature children. Sometimes we feel that He takes too much of a chance. Paul felt that way.

The emotion in Paul’s words shows how deeply involved he was in the well being of converts. The Greek word translated with “intense longing” is *epithumia*, which is also used for lust for what is forbidden. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “This is one of the few places in the New Testament where it is used in a good sense.” It is not God’s intention when we surrender to Him that we should lose our passionate feelings. What changes in our conversion is the way our passions are directed. Paul even suggest this in his Epistle to the Romans, where he writes: “Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that

⁵⁷ See Matt 21:43-46

⁵⁸ See Gen. 15:16

⁵⁹ See Acts 17:10

⁶⁰ Deut. 32:10,11

you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.”⁶¹

About the thwarting of his plans to visit them, Paul says: “For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us.” This poses the question as to who is in charge of Paul’s traveling plans. Luke records instances in which the Holy Spirit kept the Apostle from going where he planned to go. We read: “They tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.”⁶² It is sometimes difficult to determine the source of resistance. Even if the opposition is demonic, we should hold to it that God allows it for His own purpose. If Paul were convinced that Satan’s opposition to Paul’s traveling plans were not in accordance with the will of God, he could have used his authority in the Name of Jesus Christ to break through the resistance. But he did not. In this struggle, God was stimulating the process of spiritual growth, both in the church of Thessalonica and in His Apostle.

Paul does not specify in what consisted Satan’s opposition. The only other time he mentions Satan in connection to certain restrictions that were put upon him was in connection with his “thorn in the flesh.” He wrote about this to the Corinthians: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”⁶³ The meaning of the expression has been widely debated over the centuries. If we understand this to be an attack of sickness, we get a better understand of the hardship this man had to endure on his missionary journeys and how strongly his physical condition contrasted with the spiritual joy and passion evinced in this epistle.

Paul calls the Christians in Thessalonica his “crown.” He uses the same term for the believers in Philippi. In his Epistle to the Philippians, he writes: “Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown....”⁶⁴ Paul’s own salvation did not hinge on the conversion of these people. He went to heaven because the blood of Jesus had washed away his sin. But the Lord has special awards for those who serve Him faithfully on earth. This award is the presence of those who have found salvation because of our testimony. When Paul arrived in heaven, he must have found out that the crown served a different purpose from what he anticipated. John discovered what would happen when he received his heavenly vision and he saw the reaction of the elders who wore crowns. “[They] cast their crowns before the throne, saying: ‘You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power.’”⁶⁵

But there is some of the heavenly ecstasy in Paul’s passionate love for the people he was able to lead to Christ. I remember a sermon illustration: the story of a traveling evangelist, who had led a person, whom we will call Bill, to the Lord. Every time the evangelist would return to the city where Bill lived, Bill would be there upon his arrival and grab the evangelist’s hand with his own huge hands and say: “Welcome pastor!” Bill died. The evangelist said: “When I die and go to heaven, I am sure one of the first persons to meet me at the pearly gates will be Bill. He will grab my hand and I will hear his booming voice, saying: ‘Welcome pastor!’ ” May each of us have this crown to wear in that we will be greeted by a crowd that welcomes us in glory.

2. Timothy’s Visit 3:1-5

*1 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens.
2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,
3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them.
4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.*

⁶¹ Rom. 6:19-22

⁶² Acts 16:7

⁶³ II Cor. 12:7

⁶⁴ Phil. 4:1

⁶⁵ Rev. 4:10,11 (NKJV)

5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes: “The non-mention of Silas at Athens implies that he did not follow Paul to Athens, as was at first intended; but Timothy did. Thus the history, Acts 17:14-15, accords with the letter. ‘Left behind’ [kataleiphtheenai] implies, that Timothy had been with him at Athens. It was an act of self-denial for their sakes that Paul deprived himself of Timothy’s presence at Athens, being ‘left’ all ‘alone’ in the midst of philosophic cavillers.”

On the phrase “We sent Timotheus, our brother,” *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* comments: “Elsewhere he calls him his son; here he calls him brother. Timothy was Paul’s junior in age, his inferior in gifts and graces, and of a lower rank in the ministry: for Paul was an apostle, and Timothy but an evangelist; yet Paul calls him brother. This was an instance of the apostle’s humility, and showed his desire to put honor upon Timothy and to recommend him to the esteem of the churches. He calls him also a minister of God. Note, Ministers of the gospel of Christ are ministers of God, to promote the kingdom of God among men. He calls him also his fellow-laborer in the gospel of Christ. Note, Ministers of the gospel must look upon themselves as laborers in the Lord’s vineyard; they have an honorable office and hard work, yet a good work.”

Paul must have felt deeply that the suffering the Christians in Thessalonica underwent ought to have been his. Some of them took the full brunt of the crowd’s rage while Paul and his team were in hiding. Luke records the following: “The Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials.”⁶⁶ This must have aggravated his concern for them considerably. Since the whole team had left the city the night of the riot, it is likely that no further word about the believers’ condition had reached Paul in Athens.

Timothy, being a Greek (at least his father was Greek) was probably the safest person to send back to study the situation. Obviously, as mentioned above, this left Paul alone in one of the largest centers of civilization of that time, the city of Athens.

Although Paul had prepared his converts for the persecution that was likely to come, it hit him hard himself when it came. Part of Paul’s message, from the very beginning had been: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”⁶⁷ Paul shows his human side in the concern for the young believers he left behind. It was not any easier for Paul to leave matters in the hand of God than it is for us. The sending of Timothy, however, was not a mere indication of Paul’s weak faith, it was also good spiritual strategy.

Paul recognized the source of the trials and hardships of the church as demonic. He understood that the devil uses physical suffering and emotional pressure to weaken people’s spiritual resistance. The phrase: “I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless” indicates that Paul was subject to temptation himself. Satan kept on whispering to him that all his efforts would turn out to be in vain. No one is always totally immune to such emotional pressure, not even a Spirit-filled Apostle. Jesus gives us the example in His own life as to how to react to this kind of pressure. At one point, the results of His ministry in Galilee turned out to be nil. We read: “Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.’”⁶⁸ But, immediately following this denunciation, He turned to the Father and said: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and

⁶⁶ Acts 17:5,6

⁶⁷ Acts 14:22

⁶⁸ Matt. 11:20-25

learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.”⁶⁹ By this act of thanksgiving, Jesus thwarted any demonic attempt to plant a seed of discouragement in His heart.

The picture of Paul in Athens is that of a man who had had to flee for his life. He was probably suffering physically from his “thorn in the flesh” and who was left all alone in the metropolis of Athens, a city filled to the brim with idolatry. Luke reports about Paul’s reaction to Athens: “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.”⁷⁰ To our modern minds, the Athens of old was the summit of human brilliance. We associate Athens with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle whose philosophy left a lasting imprint on our Western civilization. What we find in Paul’s day, is a city under a dark cloud of spiritualism and filled with people who spent their days with trivial pursuits. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* called them “philosophic cavillers.” Luke says about them: “All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.”⁷¹

3. Timothy’s Encouraging Report 3:6-10

6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.

7 Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.

8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.

9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?

10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Timothy’s return with a good report about the condition of the church worked as a tonic on Paul’s spirit. His deep emotional involvement with the church is best put in his words: “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.” There is an interesting hint in these words that merit a closer look. Children need their parents, at least until they are old enough to stand on their own. Spiritual children need a role model that helps them to grow into a personal and indestructible fellowship with God. By linking his own happiness to their spiritual growth, Paul gives them an incentive to persevere. It would help them to endure some hardship for Paul’s sake.

While being in Athens, Paul speaks about distress and persecution in the present tense. This was not the same kind of persecution as the Apostle experienced in Thessalonica. There were not Jews in Athens that tried to rout Paul. Paul was most likely referring to his physical condition, which, as we suggested above, he attributed to demonic interference.

4. Paul’s Desire to Visit Them 3:11-13

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments here: “Almost all the chapters in both letters are sealed, each with its own prayer (1 Thess 5:23; 2 Thess 1:11; 2:16; 3:5,16).... Paul does not think

⁶⁹ Matt. 11:25,26

⁷⁰ Acts 17:17

⁷¹ Acts 17:21

the issue of a journey an unfit subject for prayer (Rom 1:10; 15:32)... His prayer, though deferred, in about five years afterward was fulfilled in his return to Macedonia.”

This prayer for guidance as to the details of his ministry is an important paradigm for all God’s servants. The Biblical admonition is: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”⁷² For Paul this meant, sometimes, disregarding the advice of others. On the journey, which was probably his last one ever to Jerusalem, Paul knew what would await him. Several people who had the gift of prophecy warned him not to go. But Paul obeyed the urge the Holy Spirit had put in his heart.⁷³ In this case it meant disregarding the strong desire of his own heart.

The main topic of his prayer is that there would be an outpouring of brotherly love in this young church. The perseverance of their faith was proof of the fact that they loved the Lord. In a way, it is easier to love God than to love one’s neighbor, especially the ones that live next-door. As the ditty says:

“To live above with saints we love,
that will be bliss and glory.
To live below with saints we know
is quite a different story.”

Love for our fellowmen is the best testimony for the Gospel. The fact that Jesus delivered us from our sins by paying the price for us is advertised the loudest in an expression of neighborly love. The main reason for Paul wanting to see the Thessalonians again was to show them his passionate love for them.

Love for our fellowmen also has a cleansing effect upon our lives. We should note the order in which Paul puts things here. It is when “[our] love increase[s] and overflow[s] for each other and for everyone else” that we “will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.” We will have no trouble loving “the saints above” (those that accompany the Lord Jesus at His coming) if we have learned to love “the saints below” first.

The Apostle John put our testimony in the right perspective by saying: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”⁷⁴ Love is the most expensive element of life. It costs everything we have and are. That is what it cost God.

II. Paul’s Instructions to the Thessalonians 4:1--5:28

A. Directions for Growth 4:1-12

1 Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

2 For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;

4 that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable,

5 not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God;

6 and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.

7 For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

8 Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

9 Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.

10 And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.

11 Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you,

⁷² Prov. 3:5,6

⁷³ See Acts 20:22-24; 21:3,4,10-14

⁷⁴ I John 3:16

12 so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

We may suppose that there was a direct connection between Timothy's report about the condition of the church in Thessalonica and Paul's admonitions in these verses. The fact that the church was doing unusually well for such a young congregation did not mean that every obstacle had been cleared and that temptations were a thing of the past.

Paul's approach is a classic example of positivism. It is obvious that, if conditions in the church were perfect, there would be no reason for the admonition here. But Paul does not clobber these young believers over the head, as he did the church in Corinth. They had engaged upon the right path to holiness but there remained an area of undiscovered sin that still had to be dealt with. The main problem must have been the members' previous involvement with pagan temple worship which required the practice of fornication with temple women and, probably, with men also. Having become Christians, they had to restructure their sexual life. The fact that those who are in Jesus Christ are "a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"⁷⁵ doesn't mean that all the details of renewal are worked out immediately. Sanctification is a growing process in which the Holy Spirit brings to mind which areas of life have not been consciously surrendered to His control. Having grown up in a pagan society in which the practice of religion was linked to temple prostitution, the young believers had to learn to take a completely new look at their own sexual behavior as Christians.

Throughout the centuries, believers have struggled with the fact that sexuality is also part of a sanctified life. The fact that Satan has entrenched himself in the field of sexual immorality does not mean that he owns this territory. God created man in His image and He invented sex. Christians have to begin at this point and discover what holiness means in marriage relationships.

Leon Morris, in *The Tyndale Commentary* on this epistle, writes: "A marked feature of life in the first century Roman Empire, and more particularly in Greece, was the tendency to sexual laxity. The environment of the Thessalonian Christians was one in which men, as a rule, thought little of the sin involved in fornication. They accepted it simply as part of normal life, so much so that ritual fornication played a part in the worship of more than one deity, and men in general found it difficult to feel deeply on the subject."

Paul's remarks here do not mean that sanctification is limited to a person's sexual behavior. Clean sexuality is a part of sanctification; it is not all of it. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes correctly: "God has called you to holiness; he requires that you should be holy; for without holiness none can see the Lord. This is the general calling, but in it many particulars are included. Some of these he proceeds to mention; and it is very likely that these had been points on which he gave them particular instructions while among them."

There are two sides to sanctification. God requires holiness from His children and He promises to do the essential part in the process of the cleansing of the soul. But this does not eliminate man's responsibility. There is, on the one hand, the promise: "I am the LORD, who makes you holy,"⁷⁶ but also the command: "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy."⁷⁷ Part of sanctification in Paul's epistle is "that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable."

The phrase "It is God's will that you should be sanctified" reads literally in the Greek "For this is the will of God, your sanctification," which is the way the NKJV renders it. *Barnes' Notes* comments on this: "It is the will or command of God that you should be holy. This does not refer to the purpose or decree of God, and does not mean that he intended to make them holy-but it means that it was his command that they should be holy. It was also true that it was agreeable to the divine will or purpose that they should be holy, and that he meant to use such an influence as to secure this; but this is not the truth taught here. This text, therefore, should not be brought as a proof that God intends to make his people holy, or that they are sanctified. It is a proof only that he requires holiness. The word here rendered 'sanctification'-hagiasmos ...-is not used in the Greek classics, but is several times found in the New Testament. It is rendered holiness, Rom 6:19,22; 1 Thess 4:7; 1 Tim 2:15; Heb 12:14; and sanctification, 1 Cor 1:30; 1 Thess 4:3-4; 2 Thess

⁷⁵ II Cor. 5:17

⁷⁶ Lev. 20:8

⁷⁷ Lev. 11:44

2:13, and 1 Peter 1:2.... It means here 'purity of life,' and particularly abstinence from those vices which debase and degrade the soul. Sanctification consists in two things: (1) in 'ceasing to do evil;' and (2) in 'learning to do well.' Or in other words, the first work of sanctification is in overcoming the propensities to evil in our nature, and checking and subduing the unholy habits which we had formed before we became Christians; the second part of the work consists in cultivating the positive principles of holiness in the soul."

The Pulpit Commentary makes the following observation: "The phrase 'the will of God,' has two significations in Scripture: the one is the determination of God—his decree; the other is his desire, that in which he delights—a will, however, which may be frustrated by the perversity of his creatures. It is in the latter sense that the word is here employed. Even your sanctification; complete consecration; holiness taken in its most general sense. Our holiness is the great design of Christ' death, and it is the revealed will of God."

Vs. 4 reads in the NIV: "that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable." The Greek word translated here with "body" is *skeuos* which literally means "a vessel." In some contexts it is used as referring to "a wife as contributing to the usefulness of the husband."⁷⁸ Peter uses the same word in his First Epistle: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker *partner* and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."⁷⁹ If *skeuos* is used for "wife" in this context, the word "control", of course does not fit. The Greek word is *ptaomai* which can be translated with, "to get, to acquire, or to own." Our interpretation of these verses hinges on our understanding of the word "vessel."

The Pulpit Commentary states here: "This word has given rise to a diversity of interpretations. Especially two meanings have been given to it. By some it is supposed to be a figurative expression for 'wife,' in which sense the word is used, though rarely, by Hebrew writers. Peter speaks of the wife 'as the weaker vessel' (1 Pet. iii.7).... This meaning is, however, to be rejected as unusual and strange, and unsuitable to what follows in the next verse. The other meaning—'one's body'—is more appropriate. Thus Paul says, 'We have this treasure,' namely, the gospel, 'in earthen vessels' (2 Cor. iv. 7; comp. also 1 Sam. xxi. 5). The body may well be compared to a vessel, as it contains the soul."

TLB renders the verse with: "For God wants you to be holy and pure and to keep clear of all sexual sin so that each of you will marry in holiness and honor." J. B. Phillips gives the following reading: "God's plan is to make you holy, and that entails first of all a clean cut with sexual immorality. Every one of you should learn to control his body, keeping it pure and treating it with respect, and never regarding it as an instrument for self-gratification, as do pagans with no knowledge of God."

The next question is what to do with the following sentence: "and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him." TLB creates some logic out of a seemingly abrupt transition with the rendering: "And this also is God's will: that you never cheat in this matter by taking another man's wife because the Lord will punish you terribly for this, as we have solemnly told you before." This paraphrase seems to convey the thought of most commentators. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, for instance, states: "That no man should by any means endeavor to corrupt the wife of another, or to alienate her affections or fidelity from her husband; this I believe to be the apostle's meaning, though some understand it of covetousness, overreaching, tricking, cheating, and cozenage in general."

Barnes' Notes, however, suggests: "According to the reading in the margin, this would refer to the particular matter under discussion (1 Thess 4:3-5), to wit, concupiscence. and the meaning then would be, that no one should be guilty of illicit intercourse with the wife of another. Many expositors... suppose that this is a prohibition of adultery, and there can be no doubt that it does include this. But there is no reason why it should be confined to it. The Greek is so general that it may prohibit all kinds of fraud, overreaching, or covetousness, and may refer to any attempt to deprive another of his rights, whether it be the right which he has in his property, or his rights as a husband, or his rights in any other respect. It is a general command not to defraud; in no way to take advantage of another; in no way to deprive him of his rights."

The Tyndale Commentary observes: "This use of the definite article seems to make it plain that Paul is continuing the thought of the previous verse, and not introducing a new topic. This is strengthened by the fact that uncleanness is referred to in the following verse, so that the idea of impurity continues through this verse and beyond. The meaning, then, is that sexual sin, besides being an offense against holiness and honor, is an act of fraud against a *brother*, in taking what is rightly his." None of the above commentaries

⁷⁸ Strong's Concordance

⁷⁹ I Peter 3:7

mentions the unmentionable possibility that Paul may be speaking of homosexual relations, which, in the context of that time were prevalent. This verse may well be parallel to the one in Romans where Paul writes: "In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion."⁸⁰ The vagueness of the Greek may be an indication that the subject was extremely repulsive to the Apostle.

Paul wants to make it very clear that his own life of celibacy is not the reason for this admonition. Some may have thought that Paul was mainly propagating his own lifestyle and that the Apostle was only giving one man's opinion about this matter. The injunction, however, is emphatic: "He who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God." Rejection of this part of God's will would endanger the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers. And the gift of the Spirit is consistent with the holiness God requires from us. In Phillip's translation of vs. 8 we read: "It is not for nothing that the Spirit God gives us is called the *Holy Spirit*."

If, in fact, the warning in the previous verses included a condemnation of homosexual relations, the transition to the subject of brotherly love is very pertinent. God allows us to express deep affection for one another in a healthy manner. Paul gives the church high points in this respect. They are known throughout the whole of Macedonia as a warm and loving fellowship. We could use an extra measure of this warmth in most of our churches today.

The Tyndale Commentary observes here: "Here we find Paul passing from the one to the other. *Brother love (philadelphia)* is not the same as love in general (*agape*). This latter is the attitude of benevolence toward all which must characterize those who have experienced the *agape* of God.... Love such as this should be exercised by the Christian toward all men, including fellow-Christians, irrespective of their merit or lack of merit. He should also exercise a special *brotherly love* toward those in the household of faith. Outside the New Testament the word *philadelphia* almost invariably denotes the love binding together the children of one father; in the New Testament it is without exception used for the love uniting Christians to one another. James Denney thought that the importance of this 'is not sufficiently considered by most Christian people; who, if they looked into the matter, might find that few of their strongest affections were determined by the common faith. Is not love a strong and peculiar word to describe the feeling you cherish toward some members of the Church, brethren to you in Christ Jesus? Yet love to the brethren is the very token of our right to a place in the Church for ourselves.' These words are not yet out of date."

In verse 11 Paul instructs the members of the church to do three things: to lead a quiet life, to mind their own business, and to work with their hands. We usually do not associate the word "ambition" with a quiet life. Ambitious people are go-getters, people who lead, stir up, and motivate others. Paul wants the church to be a fellowship of people who distinguish themselves by their quiet and orderly behavior. This ought to be the testimony toward the outside world. The minding of one's own business points to behavior within the church. This is not inconsistent with advice the Apostle gives elsewhere to "teach and admonish one another with all wisdom"⁸¹ or to "encourage one another and build each other up,"⁸² as we find later in this epistle. The responsibility we have as members of the same body to teach, encourage, and build up does not imply that we should be busybodies. We should watch that our eagerness to help does not make us obnoxious.

Some commentators think that the church consisted mainly of blue-collar workers and that the doctrine of the soon return of Christ made people stop work. But *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states that: "Greeks shunned manual labor, and Paul had taught the Thessalonians by word (the Lord was a carpenter) and by example (the apostle was a tent-maker) that the Christian doctrine of creation implies the Christian doctrine of vocation: God made everything good; therefore, man can perform the most menial tasks knowing that he is in touch with the Creator's handiwork; further, he can do them to God's glory." The Thessalonians may have resembled the Athenians of whom Luke wrote: "All the Athenians and the

⁸⁰ Rom. 1:27

⁸¹ Col. 3:16

⁸² ch. 5:11

foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.”⁸³ The phrase “so that you will not be dependent on anybody” refers, of course, to financial independence. Such a healthy condition within the church would give a good testimony to those who were not familiar with the Gospel. Our lifestyle is more convincing than our words.

B. Revelation Concerning the Dead in Christ 4:13-18

13 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.

14 We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

15 According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

18 Therefore encourage each other with these words.

This section is probably the best known of this epistle. Christians who adhere to the doctrine of pre-millennialism use this passage for their foundation. Whether Paul’s words here are proof that Christ’s second coming will precede His millennial reign is an open question. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* believes that this is not the case. We read: “These comforting words of Paul were not intended to give a systematic picture of the last things, but were geared to the problem at hand.” The fact Paul believed, at this point, that Christ’s return would take place during his lifetime places this paragraph of Scripture in a particular context, not backed up by history. In-as-much as the *Parousia* has not yet occurred, and it is obvious that neither Paul nor the recipients of this epistle are still alive, the words “we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord” have lost their relevance. But this does not make these verses irrelevant to us.

The important doctrine expounded here is the resurrection of the dead on the basis of Christ’s resurrection. This is the hope and comfort for those who are in Christ, who have lost loved ones. Paul does not speak here about seeing our loved ones when we die ourselves and go to heaven. The topic here is not dying but the resurrection of the body. It seems that this part of the doctrine of the Bible has almost completely vanished from the field of vision of modern Christians. We have become, in a sense, more ignorant than the Thessalonians were. Those who speak about the Lord’s return during their lifetime are usually older people who hope to avoid the process of dying. It would do us a world of good if we could see ourselves as people “who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord.”

Christ’s resurrection is both our hope and model. For Christians death is not “the undiscovered country from which borne no traveler returns.”

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary comments on these verses: “It is supposed that the apostle had heard that the Thessalonians continued to lament over their dead as the pagans did in general who had no hope of the resurrection of the body; and that they had been puzzled concerning the doctrine of the resurrection. To set them right on this important subject, he delivers three important truths: 1. He asserts, as he had done before, that they who died in the Lord should have, in virtue of Christ’s resurrection, a resurrection unto eternal life and blessedness. 2. He makes a new discovery, that the last generation should not die at all, but be in a moment changed to immortals. 3. He adds another new discovery, that, though the living should not die, but be transformed, yet the dead should first be raised, and be made glorious and immortal; and so, in some measure, have the preference and advantage of such as shall then be found alive.”

In the matter of death, Paul distinguishes between those who have no hope and those who have. This difference is in the knowledge of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This hope does not eliminate grief but it makes a world of difference whether we grieve in hope or without hope. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes Calvin who wrote: “Paul lifts up the minds of believers to a consideration of the resurrection, lest they should indulge excessive grief on occasion of the death of their relatives, for it were unseemly that there

⁸³ Acts 17:21

should be no difference between them and unbelievers, who put no end or measure to their grief, for this reason, that in death they recognize nothing but destruction. Those that abuse this testimony so as to establish among Christians stoical indifference, that is, an iron hardness, will find nothing of this nature in Paul's words."

The main point of Paul's argument is not the resurrection but the order in which the resurrection will take place. When Paul addressed the church in Corinth, he wrote to some who did not believe in the resurrection of the body. Such is not the case in Thessalonica.

To the Corinthians Paul wrote: "But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."⁸⁴

The believers in Thessalonica were so concerned about the resurrection that they feared their departed ones would lose out. This is what Paul tries to straighten out here. Paul uses the resurrection of Jesus as the model for our own bodily resurrection. As we can see in Paul's argument in his epistle to the Corinthians, the resurrection of Christ is the focal point of the Gospel. If Christ did not rise from the dead we are all still in our sins.

The phrase "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you..." could suggest that Paul quotes a saying by Christ that is not found in any of the Gospels. The Greek reads literally: "this [F]or unto you we say by the word of the Lord..." *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The apostle does not refer to those portions of the gospel which record our Lord's discourses concerning the last things; nor to some saying of Christ preserved by tradition; but to a direct revelation made unto himself by the Lord. We know from Scripture that Paul had many such revelations imparted to him (comp. 1 Cor. xi. 23; Gal. i. 11,12)." It could be, though, that Paul was referring to Jesus' utterance: "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."⁸⁵

The expression "fallen asleep" could give rise to the notion that, at death, a person is no longer conscious until the moment of his resurrection. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states though: "No allusion to 'soul sleeping' is involved. Paul had in mind the bodies of dead believers." *Matthew Henry's Commentary* takes a different view. We read: "Death does not annihilate them. It is but a sleep to them. It is their rest, and undisturbed rest. They have retired out of this troublesome world, to rest from all their labors and sorrows, and they sleep in Jesus, v. 14. Being still in union with him, they sleep in his arms and are under his special care and protection. Their souls are in his presence, and their dust is under his care and power; so that they are not lost, nor are they losers, but great gainers by death, and their removal out of this world is into a better." This viewpoint, however, seems to be contradicted by other parts of Scripture. The following words, "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him," suggests that those who died are fully conscious of their condition. The souls under the altar, whom John saw in Revelation, certainly were fully conscious. We read: "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'"⁸⁶ Apparently, Jesus introduced the term "sleep" for death. When He entered the death chamber of Jairus's daughter we read: "'Stop wailing,' Jesus said. 'She is not dead but asleep.' They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead."⁸⁷

Verses 15 and 16 describe what is commonly known as "the rapture." This doctrine, which tries to define the glorious hope of Christ's return, has, unfortunately, divided Christians in opposing camps that, for the last two centuries have fiercely debated each other. The fact of Christ's return is clearly taught in

⁸⁴ I Cor. 15:12-19

⁸⁵ Matt. 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27

⁸⁶ Rev. 6:9-11

⁸⁷ Luke 8:52,53; Mark 5:39^b,40

Scripture. The two angels, who addressed the disciples on the day of Christ's ascension, stated: "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."⁸⁸ Also the resurrection of the believers who died is taught in a way that can hardly be misunderstood. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."⁸⁹ But when Jesus Himself spoke of the resurrection of the dead, He did not distinguish between a resurrection for believers and unbelievers. Whether He prophetically telescoped two events into one, or whether He meant that there was only to be one resurrection, cannot be determined for the words John recorded: "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out-those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."⁹⁰

Paul writes that "the Lord himself will come down from heaven," and that "we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Many people interpret this to mean that Christ will not come to the earth but will draw the believers to Himself in midair. Although Paul's words can be interpreted like that, the text does not clearly state this. Luke describes Jesus' ascension with the words: "He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight."⁹¹ Paul's reference to "the air" (some versions use the words "clouds") may well be a reference to the original ascension. Paul's words do not necessarily prove that Jesus' feet will not touch the ground.

It seems to me that some of the arguments in favor of a pre-tribulation rapture would not hold up too well in a court of law. I hold the doctrine to be plausible, very plausible. But considering the fact that Scripture itself never makes the sequence of events the focal point of its teaching, I believe that we should consider the details of Christ's return a gray area.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary gives us a detailed order of the events Paul alludes to here. The author does not follow completely the pre-tribulation order that is upheld by some believers, but he gives us a moving projection of what will happen. We read: "Observe the order of this terribly glorious day:

1. Jesus, in all the dignity and splendor of his eternal majesty, shall descend from heaven to the mid-region, what the apostle calls the air, somewhere within the earth's atmosphere.
2. Then the keleusma ..., shout or order, shall be given for the dead to arise.
3. Next the archangel, as the herald of Christ, shall repeat the order, 'Arise, ye dead, and come to judgment!'
4. When all the dead in Christ are raised, then the trumpet shall sound, as the signal for them all to flock together to the throne of Christ. It was by the sound of the trumpet that the solemn assemblies, under the law, were convoked; and to such convocations there appears to be here an allusion.
5. When the dead in Christ are raised, their vile bodies being made like unto his glorious body, then,
6. Those who are alive shall be changed, and made immortal.
7. These shall be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air.
8. We may suppose that the judgment will now be set, and the books opened, and the dead judged out of the things written in those books.
9. The eternal states of quick and dead being thus determined, then all who shall be found to have made a covenant with him by sacrifice, and to have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, shall be taken to his eternal glory, and be forever with the Lord. What an inexpressibly terrific glory will then be exhibited! I forbear to call in here the descriptions which men of a poetic turn have made of this terrible scene, because I cannot trust to their correctness; and it is a subject which we should speak of and contemplate as nearly as possible in the words of Scripture."

As stated above, I tend to hold a pre-tribulation view of the rapture but I want to state emphatically that I do not believe that a differing interpretation has any bearing on man's salvation. An honest study of Scripture reveals that different interpretations are possible. If they become a reason for separation of believers, nobody makes any gain but the enemy of our souls.

⁸⁸ Acts 1:11

⁸⁹ I Cor. 15:51,52

⁹⁰ John 5:28,29

⁹¹ Acts 1:9

We all ought to be ready for the Lord's coming today. And the hope of being reunited with our departed loved ones should be a source of great comfort for all of us. We can trust the Lord to work out the details.

C. Description of the Day of the Lord 5:1-11

- 1 Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you,
 2 for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.
 3 While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.
 4 But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.
 5 You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.
 6 So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.
 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.
 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.
 9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.
 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.
 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

This portion of Paul's epistle ought to receive more emphasis in preaching than the previous one. This, however, is usually not the case. There is something in the prophecies about the end of time that appeals to man's sense of sensation. It doesn't seem to bother believers that this kind of curiosity finds its origin more often in the flesh than in the spirit. During a conference about end time prophecies, at which the audience took copious notes, one of the preachers took for his text "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."⁹² He commented later that, as soon as the text was announced, all the pens and notebooks disappeared and the attention level of the audience dropped considerably.

Paul reminds his readers of what they already know, namely that the exact time of the Lord's return is not known. In his preaching to them, he may have mentioned the fact that Jesus had told His disciples: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."⁹³ I have never understood why these clear statements have not kept, otherwise solid, Christians from endeavoring to pinpoint the moment of Christ's return. On the clause: "we do not need to write to you," *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "The reason why it was not needful for the apostle to write unto them was, not because he regarded the information unprofitable or superfluous, or because he knew it to be impossible, but because he had already informed them when at Thessalonica that the time of the advent was beyond the sphere of his teaching. The apostle mentions this to repress that vain curiosity which is natural to man, and which was the occasion of so much disorder among the Thessalonians. Our duty is, not to pry into the times and seasons which the Father hath put in his own power (Acts i. 7), but to exercise constant watchfulness."

Paul speaks about "the times and dates." Most other versions use the words "the times and the seasons" (some use "epochs" instead of "seasons"). *The Tyndale Commentary* comments on this: "[Paul] makes use of two words for 'times,' the first, *chronoi*, denoting time in its chronological aspect as mere succession, and the second, *kairoi* (seasons), having reference rather to time in its qualitative aspect. Thus if a young man spends five minutes with his fiancée the chronological time is exactly the same as when he spends five minutes in the dentist's chair, but the quality of the two periods is different. He may well feel that the former is but a fleeting moment, and the latter not much short of eternity! With regard to the second advent, then, the *chronoi* are the chronological epochs that must elapse, time considered simply with regard to its duration, while the *kairoi* focus our attention rather on the nature of the times, on the critical events which will take place as heralding the coming of the Lord."

It is interesting to observe that Paul uses the term "the day of the Lord" to describe the Parousia. To a Jewish audience, this would be a familiar, Old Testament expression, used by the prophets Amos, Joel, and Zephaniah. In every instance in the Old Testament, "the Day of the Lord" is associated with judgment. It

⁹² I John 3:3

⁹³ Matt. 24:37

certainly is not synonymous with “the blessed hope” of the New Testament. Amos announced: “Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light- pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?”⁹⁴

The image of the thief in the night is one that is used throughout the whole New Testament. Jesus introduced the picture. Matthew reports Jesus’ words: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”⁹⁵ Peter wrote: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”⁹⁶ And in Revelation we find Jesus saying twice: “I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you,” and “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”⁹⁷ *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The point of resemblance is evidently the unexpectedness and suddenness of the coming. The thief comes upon people in the night season, when they are asleep and unprepared; so, in a similar manner, when Christ comes, he will find the world unprepared and not expecting his advent. The ancient Fathers inferred from this passage that Christ would come to judgment in the night season, and hence they instituted vigils, or night watches. Some, still more precisely, fixed the coming on Easter night, from the analogy of the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt on the paschal evening.” The Fathers were, evidently, unaware of the fact that when it is night on one side of our globe, it is bright day at the other!

Concurring with the above is the comment from *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, “[But ye, brethren, are not in darkness] Probably Paul refers to a notion that was very prevalent among the Jews, namely: that God would judge the Gentiles in the night time, when utterly secure and careless; but he would judge the Jews in the daytime, when employed in reading and performing the words of the law. The words in Midrash Tehillim, on Ps 9:8, are the following: When the holy blessed God shall judge the Gentiles, it shall be in the night season, in which they shall be asleep in their transgressions; but when he shall judge the Israelites, it shall be in the daytime, when they are occupied in the study of the law. This maxim the apostle appears to have in view in 1 Thess 5:4-8.”

From the use of the image it is impossible to distinguish between a coming in the clouds for a rapture and a coming to earth in judgment. >From the context of this epistle, we may assume that Paul is still speaking about Christ’s return to gather His bride and not about the Day of Judgment that will mark the end of this creation. But then again, “While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape” can hardly be applied to the saints who will be taken up at the rapture.

The subject is preparedness not eschatology, and preparedness has to do with moral conduct. We prepare ourselves by living a pure life. In John’s words: “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”⁹⁸ Such was Paul’s testimony before Felix, which we quoted earlier. He said: “So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.”⁹⁹

The words “sons of the light and sons of the day” and belonging “to the night or to the darkness” are, according to *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, “examples of [a] Semitic idiom.” The commentary quotes other examples of this, as: “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.

⁹⁴ Amos 5:18-20

⁹⁵ Matt. 24:42-44

⁹⁶ II Peter 3:10

⁹⁷ Rev. 3:3; 16:15

⁹⁸ I John 3:3

⁹⁹ Acts 24:16

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”¹⁰⁰ And: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.”¹⁰¹ And also: “Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.”¹⁰²

None of the above can be applied to a normal night’s rest. The Bible does not teach us that we should not give to our bodies the rest they need. As a matter of fact we may be an easier prey to a satanic attack when we are tired than when we are rested. Moral awareness and good health are not identical but they are compatible. The condensed reference to the spiritual armor, which is depicted in greater detail in the Ephesian Epistle¹⁰³, suggests that the darkness mentioned is not the natural phenomenon of night but a spiritual power which is out to attack us. There is nothing particularly spiritual in staying up late and getting insufficient sleep.

In vs. 10 Paul seems to abandon the image to return to the physical reality of sleeping and being awake. That, at least, is the impression the NIV gives us: “He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.” TLB gives the verse a spiritual connotation with: “He died for us so that we can live with him forever, whether we are dead or alive at the time of his return.” The latter rendering ties in well with the subject of the previous chapter.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary supports this interpretation. We read: “Whether we live or die, whether we are in this state or in the other world, we shall live together with him—shall enjoy his life, and the consolations of his Spirit, while here; and shall be glorified together with him in the eternal world. The words show that everywhere and in all circumstances genuine believers, who walk after God, have life and communion with him, and are continually happy, and constantly safe. The apostle, however, may refer to the doctrine he has delivered, 1 Thess 4:15, concerning the dead in Christ rising first; and the last generation of men not dying, but undergoing such a change as shall render them immortal. On that great day, all the followers of God, both those who had long slept in the dust of the earth, and all those who shall be found living, shall be acknowledged by Christ as his own, and live together forever with him.”

The Pulpit Commentary also interprets Paul’s words in that sense with: “That, whether we wake or sleep. Here not to be taken in an ethical sense— whether we are spiritually awake or asleep, for those who are spiritually asleep will be surprised by the coming of the Lord; nor in a natural sense— whether he come in the night and find us taking our natural sleep, or in the day, when we are awake— which would be a mere trifling observation; but in a metaphorical sense— whether we are alive or dead. The apostle has just been speaking of those who are dead under the designation of those ‘who are asleep’ (ch. iv. 13), and therefore it is natural to interpret the clause, ‘whether we wake or sleep,’ of the condition of believers at the coming of the Lord. There is here certainly a change of metaphor: ‘sleep’ in ver. 6 denotes religious carelessness; in ver. 7, natural sleep; and here, death.” All this does not mean that there is no application to our natural sleep. It is true that must in these verses links it to the subject in the previous chapter. But Paul indicates elsewhere that being a Christian involves all of our daily life, included eating, drinking, sleeping, and being awake. In his Epistle to the Corinthians we read: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”¹⁰⁴ The apostle uses his metaphors in a virtuoso, and sometimes even, playful manner. Being self-controlled and putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet certainly pertains to everyday life.

On Paul’s mention of the armor, *The Tyndale Commentary* makes the following observation: “The metaphor of armor is one which had a certain attraction for the apostle, for he uses it in Rom. xiii. 12f., 2 Cor. vi. 7, x. 4, and Eph. vi. 13ff., where the idea is most fully developed. The details are not always the same, which is a warning against pressing the metaphor too closely. Thus, in Ephesians, the breastplate is

¹⁰⁰ Luke 16:8

¹⁰¹ Eph. 5:8

¹⁰² Col. 1:12,13

¹⁰³ See Eph. 6:10-17

¹⁰⁴ I Cor. 10:31

righteousness, while faith is the shield and neither hope nor love is mentioned. The whole idea probably goes back to Is. lix. 17, where Jehovah is depicted as a warrior armed.”

The word self-control suggests, first of all, that the self ought to be controlled and that a lack of self-control would have disastrous consequence. Self-control puts the emphasis on a personal responsibility. God does not control for us what we have to control ourselves. This does not mean that there is no divine aid available. The need for self-control involves the confession that we have a fatal flaw in our character and that, if things get out of hand, we would all be worse than wild animals.

Christ’s death is mentioned in opposition to our life. His death is the price He paid for our forgiveness which saves us from God’s wrath over the sin of man. His resurrection, which is not mentioned here, is the basis for our living with Him. Elsewhere, Paul states that Christ “was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”¹⁰⁵ This is even more clearly expressed in “For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”¹⁰⁶ The cryptic way in which Paul says it here is very powerful.

The phrase “Therefore encourage one another” is the same as the one used at the end of the previous chapter. The Greek word translated “encourage” is *parakaleo*. It is the same word from which Paraclete is derived, the name Christ gave to the Holy Spirit. Most older versions render it “comfort,” the ASV with “exhort.” The latter may be the most correct in the context since Paul is speaking about moral behavior and building up one another. “Comfort” fits better at the end of chapter four where the topic was the lot of the deceased.

D. Instruction for Holy Living

5:12-22

12 *Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.*

13 *Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.*

14 *And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*

15 *Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.*

16 *Be joyful always;*

17 *pray continually;*

18 *give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

19 *Do not put out the Spirit's fire;*

20 *do not treat prophecies with contempt.*

21 *Test everything. Hold on to the good.*

22 *Avoid every kind of evil.*

Paul ends his exhortation with a rapid succession of instructions regarding life in fellowship with other believers. In verses 12 and 13 he is, obviously, speaking about elders although that title is not used. In his instructions to Timothy, the apostle said virtually the same thing, while entering into more practical details. We read: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’”¹⁰⁷ Holding them in the highest regard in love, obviously, involves financial support. The people meant here are what pastors are in our modern church. It is interesting to see how practical Paul was in his concept of having respect for leaders. If love and high regard were not expressed in terms of financial support, he did not consider this to be proper respect.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary states here: “[Esteem them very highly in love] Christian ministers, who preach the whole truth, and labor in the word and doctrine, are entitled to more than respect;

¹⁰⁵ Rom. 4:25

¹⁰⁶ Rom. 5:10

¹⁰⁷ I Tim. 5:17,18

the apostle commands them to be esteemed *huperekperissou*,¹⁰⁸ abundantly, and superabundantly; and this is to be done in love; and as men delight to serve those whom they love, it necessarily follows that they should provide for them, and see that they want neither the necessities nor conveniences of life; I do not say comforts, though these also should be furnished; but of these the genuine messengers of Christ are frequently destitute. However, they should have food, raiment, and lodging for themselves and their household. This they ought to have for their work's sake; those who do not work should not eat. As ministers of Christ, such as labor not are unworthy either of respect or support.”

The admonition, at the end of the verse, to live in peace with one another is not connected to the rest of the verse. It does not merely pertain to the relationship of the church with the elders or of the elders among one another, but to the church at large. Paul had commended the church in Thessalonica for their labor prompted by love, but that does not necessarily mean that the members of the church always got along with each other. Since the church is the body of Christ, harmony among the members is of vital importance for a healthy functioning.

It seems that the words in verses 13 and 14 are addressed to the church at large, although we would think that what Paul says is rather a job description for an elder. The verbs used are: warn, encourage, help. And the objects of the verbs are: those who are idle, the timid, and the weak. The apostle, evidently, wanted every member of the church to participate in the task of keeping the church a healthy fellowship.

Matthew Henry's Commentary elaborates the subject with the following: “They must edify one another, by following after those things whereby one may edify another, Rom 14:19. As Christians are lively stones built up together a spiritual house, they should endeavor to promote the good of the whole church by promoting the work of grace in one another. And it is the duty of every one of us to study that which is for the edification of those with whom we converse, to please all men for their real profit. We should communicate our knowledge and experiences one to another. We should join in prayer and praise one with another. We should set a good example one before another. And it is the duty of those especially who live in the same vicinity and family thus to comfort and edify one another; and this is the best neighborhood, the best means to answer the end of society. Such as are nearly related together and have affection for one another, as they have the greatest opportunity, so they are under the greatest obligation, to do this kindness one to another. This the Thessalonians did (which also you do), and this is what they are exhorted to continue and increase in doing. Note, those who do that which is good have need of further exhortations to excite them to do good, to do more good, as well as continue in doing what they do.”

The mention of “those who are idle” does not refer to the elders either but to some of the members of the church. The Greek word rendered “idle” in the NIV is *ataktos*. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* explains that it “signifies ‘not keeping order’...; it was especially a military term, denoting ‘not keeping rank, insubordinate’; it is used in 1 Thess 5:14, describing certain church members who manifested an insubordinate spirit, whether by excitability or officiousness or idleness.” And *Adam Clarke's Commentary* adds: “The whole phraseology of this verse is military.... Those who are out of their ranks, and are neither in a disposition nor situation to perform the work and duty of a soldier; those who will not do the work prescribed, and who will meddle with what is not commanded. There are many such in every church that is of considerable magnitude.” Why modern translations render the word with “idle” is not clear to me. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “idle” with: “not occupied or employed, inactive, lazy.” The word makes us rather think of another admonition Paul gives in his second epistle: “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat.’”¹⁰⁹ We find the word “idle” in that context also. Paul had given the church a model of, what in our day would be called, “Protestant work ethics.”

The NIV reads, “Encourage the timid.” These words have been translated differently in other versions. The KJV's “comfort the feebleminded” is obviously archaic. The word “feebleminded” has acquired a different meaning in modern English. TLB reads: “comfort those who are frightened,” and the

¹⁰⁸ Rendered “very highly” in the NIV

¹⁰⁹ II Thess. 3:6-10

RSV “encourage the fainthearted.” The Greek word is *oligopsuchos* which may be rendered: “dispirited, the disheartened, the downcast.” Some commentators see in it a reference to those who mourned departed loved ones, who were mentioned at the end of the previous chapter. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* puts it in the context of a spiritual battle. “Those of little souls; the faint-hearted; those who, on the eve of a battle, are dispirited, because of the number of the enemy, and their own feeble and unprovided state. Let them know that the battle is not theirs, but the Lord’s; and that those who trust in him shall conquer.” If this verse also borrows its language from the army, that interpretation surely makes sense.

Paul does not elaborate in this epistle what he means by “the weak.” In his epistle to the Romans, the term “weak” is used in regard to matters of only peripheral importance, such as eating meat, or observing certain feasts. We read there: “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.”¹¹⁰ Whether such is the case here, is an open question. The Greek word *asthenes* denotes someone who has no strength to stand on his own feet. Again, in the context of a military vocabulary, it could mean those who are too tired to fight, or who are wounded. It is said that the church is the only army that shoots its wounded.

There is no misunderstanding in “Be patient with everyone.” The problem with impatience is a lack of long-term memory. Some people tend to forget how long it took them to reach the place they occupy. Impatience often is an indication of unwillingness to recognize one’s own weaknesses. The recognition of our own weaknesses in other people is often a cause for frustration. It helps to know ourselves and to forgive in others what we want to be forgiven of ourselves. The need for patience is an indicator that we are not dealing with perfect human beings. People who work in an insane asylum have to make all kinds of allowances for the behavior of their patients. In the church of Jesus Christ, we are dealing with people who are “spiritually challenged” (which is the politically correct expression for those who lack complete spiritual health). The problem is that the nursing staff completely consists of patients. Paul’s admonition in Galatians is “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”¹¹¹ The intent there is actually “Put up with the idiosyncrasies of other people.” Jesus described the problem with the unforgettable image of the speck and the plank: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”¹¹²

The advice of the following verses gives us a blueprint for victorious living: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances.” Reading those words, one would get the impression that one who never had one single trouble in his life is speaking. Knowing Paul, and remembering his painful experiences in Philippi and harrowing escape from Thessalonica, places this counsel in quite a different light. Paul gives this advice as one who was fully aware of the spiritual warfare that goes on. His recommendations are no whimsical hints for escapism but weapons of warfare. The joy is not a reaction to favorable circumstances but an exercise in spiritual resistance of the enemy. Nehemiah told the people who had come under conviction of their sin, “The joy of the LORD is your strength.”¹¹³ The Hebrew word used there is *ma’owz* which means “a fortified place, a defense.” It is God’s will for us in Jesus Christ that we run for cover from life’s heartaches and take our refuge in His joy. Jesus practiced this when the results of His ministry were overwhelmingly disappointing. We read: “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.’”¹¹⁴

The command to pray continually is not difficult to understand. Difficult circumstances tend to lead to prayer. What is harder to grasp is that prayer is put here in the context of joy and gratitude. This means that our prayers have to be flanked by joy and thankfulness “in all circumstances.” In the book *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom and her sister Betsie are in a German concentration camp. Betsie quoted Paul’s words to “give thanks in all circumstances.” Corrie protested that they could hardly thank the Lord for the fleas that made life so miserable in their barracks. But Betsie insisted and thanked the Lord for the fleas. The sisters

¹¹⁰ Rom. 14:1

¹¹¹ Gal. 6:2

¹¹² Matt. 7:3

¹¹³ Neh. 8:10^b

¹¹⁴ Luke 10:21

later found out that the fleas kept the camp guards away from their barracks and allowed them to have their daily Bible study and prayer meeting. When we meet disaster with thanksgiving we erect a fortification against demonic attacks. When Job hears of the calamities that befell him, we read that he reacted as follows: "At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.'" ¹¹⁵ Job's prayer was not merely a prayer of resignation, it was a counter attack on the enemy.

The reference to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in vs. 19 is in the context of the gift of prophecy. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "The Greek construction suggests the translation: Stop quenching the Spirit. Quench aptly describes the hindering of the Spirit, whose nature has been likened to fire (Matt 3:11; Acts 2:3-4). In light of 1 Thess 5:20, this verse seems to indicate that some cautious believers had questioned the use of spiritual gifts in the church. This situation would be the opposite of that in 1 Cor 12-14, where we find ungracious zeal to outdo each other in exercising spiritual gifts. It is possible, however, that Paul's statement here is general, forbidding them to check the Spirit's refining and convicting work in their lives (cf. Eph 4:30). In 1 Cor 14:1 believers are urged to seek the gift of prophecy, the Spirit-guided public utterances of deep truths. This gift may have been abused; but abuse does not preclude use. The predictive element in Biblical prophesying should neither be overstressed nor minimized."

Barnes' Notes adds to this: "[Quench not the Spirit] This language is taken from the way of putting out a fire, and the sense is, we are not to extinguish the influences of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Possibly there may be an allusion here to fire on an altar, which was to be kept constantly burning. This fire may have been regarded as emblematic of devotion, and as denoting that that devotion was never to become extinct. The Holy Spirit is the source of true devotion, and hence the enkindlings of piety in the heart, by the Spirit, are never to be quenched. Fire may be put out by pouring on water; or by covering it with any incombustible substance; or by neglecting to supply fuel. If it is to be made to burn, it must be nourished with proper care and attention. The Holy Spirit, in his influences on the soul, is here compared with fire that might be made to burn more intensely, or that might be extinguished. In a similar manner the apostle gives this direction to Timothy, 'I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up *anazoopurein* . . . , kindle up, cause to burn) the gift of God;' 2 Tim 1:6. Anything that will tend to damp the ardor of piety in the soul; to chill our feelings; to render us cold and lifeless in the service of God, may be regarded as 'quenching the Spirit.' Neglect of cultivating the Christian graces, or of prayer, of the Bible, of the sanctuary, of a careful watchfulness over the heart, will do it. Worldliness, vanity, levity, ambition, pride, the love of dress, or indulgence in an improper train of thought, will do it. It is a great rule in religion that all the piety which there is in the soul is the fair result of culture. A man has no more religion than he intends to have; he has no graces of the Spirit which he does not seek; he has no deadness to the world which is not the object of his sincere desire, and which he does not aim to have. Any one, if he will, may make elevated attainments in the divine life; or he may make his religion merely a religion of form, and know little of its power and its consolations."

The ministry of the Holy Spirit, whether in the exercise of gifts or in the guidance of the everyday life of the church, is one of the most neglected elements in our day. Jesus warned the church in Ephesus: "You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."¹¹⁶ Many churches seem to thrive quite well without the benefit of the lampstand.

Paul's admonition seems to be addressed to the church as a whole, rather than to individual believers, and we may conclude that the Holy Spirit's fire here is not that which burns in each individual heart but the testimony of the church as a whole.

The four points Paul articulates in rapid succession in the verses 19-22 open some valuable perspectives on the responsibility of the church in the exercise of spiritual gifts and on the gift of discernment each member of the church has to employ. The fact that one member stands up and says: "Thus says the Lord" does not mean that the Lord, necessarily, speaks through that person. Jesus warned: "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you

¹¹⁵ Job 1:20,21

¹¹⁶ Rev. 2:4,5

evildoers!’”¹¹⁷ If the Lord can call some people who prophesy in His name “evildoers,” we understand that the gifts of the Spirit may never be separated from the fruit of the Spirit. People who lead immoral lives have no right to speak in the Name of the Lord. The words “Avoid every kind of evil” are part of the whole warning of these verses. And since preaching is a form of prophecy, we ought to listen to sermons in a critical manner. This last statement needs some clarification. Criticism must concern itself with a comparison between what is said and revealed biblical truth, not with peripheral matters. The Lord will also hold us responsible for the way we criticize. But the fact that Paul says: “Test everything. Hold on to the good” proves that not everything that is presented in the church as Gospel truth is the truth of God. The enemy sows tares among the wheat and we are called upon to use spiritual discernment. The way Paul presents this also indicates that using sound criticism is not the equivalent of condemnation. We are merely told to “hold on to the good.”

The section ends with “Avoid every kind of evil.” The KJV reads: “Abstain from all appearance of evil.” These two translations are not similar. *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament* observes: “As commonly explained, abstain from everything that even *looks like* evil. But the word signifies *form* or *kind*.... It never has the sense of semblance. Moreover, it is impossible to abstain from everything that looks like evil.”

Barnes’ Notes draws some conclusions that could lead to a rather legalistic lifestyle. We read: “A great variety of subjects, such as those pertaining to dress, amusements, the opera, the ball-room, games of chance and hazard, and various practices in the transaction of business, come under this general class; which, though on the supposition that they cannot be proved to be in themselves positively wrong or forbidden, have much the ‘appearance’ of evil, and will be so interpreted by others. The safe and proper rule is to lean always to the side of virtue.” This observation is based on the meaning of the word *eidos* as meaning “appearance” as it appears in the KJV. It also takes the phrase out of context. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* keeps the context in view and is, therefore, probably closer to the truth. We read: “The context refers not to standing aloof from every evil appearance IN OURSELVES but IN OTHERS; for instance, pretended spirit-inspired prophesyings. The Christian often should not abstain from what has the ‘appearance’ of evil, when really good. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, and ate with publicans-acts which wore the appearance of evil, but which were really good. The context favors this sense: However specious be such pretended prophets and their ‘prophesyings,’ stand aloof from every such appearance when it is evil.” This does not mean that we should be careless about the testimony we project to the outside world. Our behavior should be such that, when people take a close look at us, they can glorify God. In the words of Peter: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”¹¹⁸

E. Conclusion 5:23-28

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

25 Brothers, pray for us.

26 Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

27 I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

In the blessing that concludes this epistle, Paul prays for the total sanctification of the believers in Thessalonica. The appellation “the God of peace” is interesting in this context. The process of sanctification takes place in the midst of the cosmic battle between God and Satan. The Book of Job sets the stage for us. We learn from Job’s story that man is torn between forces that are beyond the scope of his vision. Adam’s fall into sin has caused us all to be born in the camp of the enemy. When we come over to God’s side through confession, conversion, and regeneration, the battle intensifies. Sanctification is the process by which the birthmarks are eradicated in our spirit, soul, and body.

¹¹⁷ Matt. 7:22,23

¹¹⁸ I Peter 2:12

The Adam Clarke's Commentary observes: "That same God who is the author of peace, the giver of peace; and who has sent, for the redemption of the world, the Prince of peace; may that very God sanctify you wholly; leave no more evil in your hearts than his precepts tolerate evil in your conduct. The word wholly, *holoteleis*...., means precisely the same as our phrase, to all intents and purposes. May he sanctify you to the end and to the uttermost, that, as sin hath reigned unto death, even so may grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord."

Paul makes a distinction between the spirit, the soul, and the body. *The Tyndale Commentary* states: "This is sometimes used as an argument for a trichotomous view of man, as against a dichotomous view, but this is probably unjustified. Paul is not here concerned to give a theoretical analysis of the nature of man, but is uttering a fervent prayer that the entire man may be preserved. Milligan thinks that the threefold petition is meant for 'man's whole being, whether on its immortal, its personal, or its bodily side.' " I see no reason to interpret Paul's distinction differently from what it seems to imply, that man consists of three parts. *The Pulpit Commentary* draws this conclusion with which I wholeheartedly concur: "The apostle here divides human nature into three parts—spirit, soul, and body; and this threefold division is not a mere rhetorical statement; 'The apostle pouring forth from the fullness of his heart a prayer for his converts' (Jowett); but a distinct statement of the three component parts of human nature. The 'spirit' is the highest part of man, that which assimilates him to God; renders him capable of religion, and susceptible of being acted upon by the Spirit of God. The 'soul' is the inferior part of his mental nature, the seat of the passions and desires, of the natural propensities. The 'body' is the corporeal frame. Such a threefold distinction of human nature was not unknown among the Stoics and Platonists. There are also traces of it in the Old Testament, the spirit, or breath of God, being distinguished from the soul."

The fact that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, sometimes uses the words "spirit" and "soul" interchangeably complicates the issue. The writer of Ecclesiastes, however, seems to make a distinction between man's spirit, soul, and body in his beautiful poetic description of death, when "the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."¹¹⁹

Some scholars believe that the "spirit" here is a reference to the Holy Spirit but there would be no need for the Holy Spirit in man to become "wholly sanctified." If spirit and soul are synonymous, it would mean that our soul, the organ of our mind, emotions, and will, would be the sole vehicle for fellowship with God. It is my opinion that when Adam and Eve sinned, their spirit died. Their souls were obviously still alive after the fall. When a person is born-again by the influence of the Holy Spirit, it is his spirit that is raised from the dead, allowing him to enter into fellowship with God.

There are obviously two sides to sanctification. Paul had earlier stated: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification."¹²⁰ And the Old Testament states the God intends to make His children holy. We read in Leviticus: "I am the LORD, who makes you holy."¹²¹ On the other hand, God orders us to be holy. We also read in Leviticus: "I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy."¹²² Paul's emphasis in these verses is on God's part of our sanctification.

We have to understand what holiness means. Our problem is that holiness is impossible for us to define in a positive sense. We can only describe it in negative terms. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines holy as: 1: worthy of absolute devotion 2: SACRED 3: having a divine quality ..., blessed, sanctified, consecrated." None of this helps us to understand the essence of the concept, apart from the fact that it is related to the character of God. To be holy is to be like God, which is what we are not, nor can we be without supernatural intervention. The only option we have is to desire sanctification and to present ourselves to God in an act of surrender. The promise in these verses is: "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it." God calls us to be holy and He will make us holy if we allow Him to do so. "May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" implies more than that our whole person ought to become holy. The words "be kept blameless" indicate that we are

¹¹⁹ Eccl. 12:6,7

¹²⁰ ch. 4:3 (NKJV)

¹²¹ Lev. 22:32

¹²² Lev. 11:45

holy now and have to remain so until the return of the Lord. Paul does not speak about the process of sanctification but about the preservation of our position of holiness in Christ. “Blameless” infers that Satan will have no ground to accuse us. This is only possible if we overcome him “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of [our] testimony; [if we do] not love [our] lives so much as to shrink from death.”¹²³ Only God is “able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.”¹²⁴

The epistle ends with a humble request for prayer and for the passing on of Paul’s love to the church in an affectionate way. “I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers” could mean that the letter was addressed to a small group of leaders in the church but it could also suggest that there were some people in the church who wanted to play a leading role in church affairs without involving the congregation as a whole. The epistle was addressed to the church as a whole. Some individuals may have thought that they were the church.

The closing benediction is one of the shorter ones in Paul’s epistles: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” But it is enough. We can all function well if the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is with us.

¹²³ See Rev. 12:11

¹²⁴ Jude 24