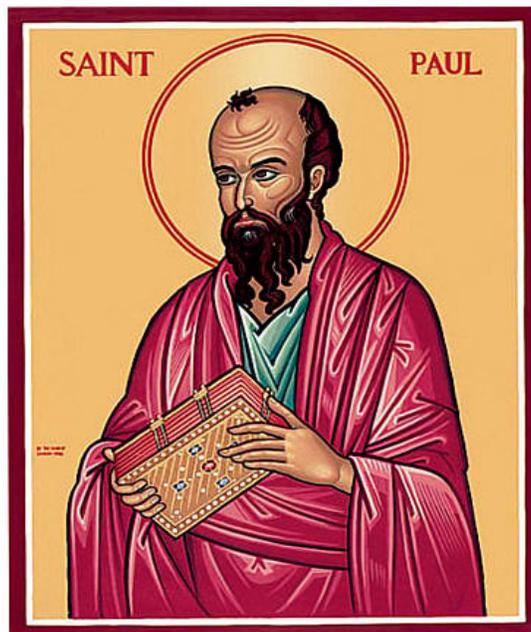


PAUL'S LETTERS TO THE CHURCH OF THESSALONICA



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SYLLABUS

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INTRODUCTION

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1: Historical Background

Thessalonica, founded in 316 BC, was a sizable city located in Macedonia (current-day Greece). It remained a major Greek city until 168 BC when it was overrun by Roman forces and made the capitol of Macedon in 148 BC. It was made a free city in 58 BC and became quite prosperous.

There was a large Jewish community in Thessalonica with a synagogue located in the midst of numerous temples that existed to honor the many Greco-Roman deities.

At the time of these two letters there was a great militant movement among the Jews throughout the Roman Empire declaring the coming of a powerful Messiah who would overthrow the Romans and re-establish Israel to its former greatness. This created uneasiness on the part of Rome which wanted to keep these religious zealots in place under the watchful eye and power of Roman civil and military leaders.

By 50 AD a new religion, Christianity, had been spreading, proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth as this prophesied Messiah. He had lived, died, risen from the dead and then, before returning to heaven, left instructions to his followers to spread his message of salvation throughout the world. This caught the attention of Roman leaders who then brought animosity and persecution to Christians as they were seen as a threat to the emperor and to the Roman Empire as a whole.

Nevertheless, a Christian church was established in Thessalonica by the apostle Paul, probably around 49 AD. It quickly began to spread and thrive there. Paul was forced to leave there because of his apparent militant, anti-emperor message but the local community of believers continued to grow. These two letters were written by Paul to the followers in lieu of his opportunity to return and visit them in person. The Biblical historical narrative coincides with events found in Acts 16:6-18:5.

2: Authorship

While some arguments appear from time to time about the authenticity of these two letters, nothing has been strong enough to persuade most scholars as a whole to conclude that they were not written by the apostle Paul.

It is likely that Paul wrote both letters while he was living in Corinth along with Silas, Timothy, and probably others. The frequent use of plural pronouns (we, our, us) suggests that Paul is including his friends in agreement with the content of the letters. Both letters appear in the earliest lists of Pauline manuscripts lending further credibility, both from internal and external clues, that Paul was indeed the author of both letters.

3: Date

Traditionally the dating for both letters has been estimated at 50 AD during what has become known as Paul's second missionary journey. Paul had established the church in Thessalonica the year before in 49 AD. It appears that Timothy was acting as a courier between Paul, who at the time was in Corinth, and the Thessalonians. It is likely that the two letters are written less than a year apart.

4: Themes

The primary theme of both letters is *eschatology*, from the Greek word for the study of "last things". In this case the last things refers to the Christian belief of the return of Jesus Christ to redeem, renew and re-order all of creation. It is apparent that many in this early Christian period believed the evidence of these things was already beginning to appear. There was no understanding of waiting for a single moment in time when all the last things would occur instantaneously. The so-called "age-to-come" is already here, though only partially, and the rest is moving towards the readers.

This age to come not only includes the reappearance of Christ (known as the *Parousia*) but also the appearance of an anti-Christ, a being who would attempt to thwart the return of Christ and the establishment of a new order of creation.

As far as the timing of these events is concerned, Paul seems at this point in his career, to be convinced that the return of Christ will happen within his lifetime and imminently at that. Thus there is a sense of urgency that he relates to the readers of these two letters that now is the time to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,

because, once Christ returns, the opportunity to make that decision will have passed and eternal destruction will be the result.

There are also a few minor themes in the two letters as well:

- How should one prepare for the second coming of Christ?
- How does one remain faithful in the face of persecution and suffering?
- There is also the introduction of *trinitarian* theology, that is, understanding the relationship between God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit.

5: Method of Study

This study is presented in a format similar to an historical novel that includes background information and occasionally, three levels of questions.

- **Level One (L1)** questions are very simple, regurgitation of information found in the text itself. Clues will be provided to show you exactly where to search for the answers. These are presented for everyone but especially the student who is taking a Bible study for the first time. This creates a sense of accomplishment for these students, encouraging them to dive a little deeper.
- **Level Two (L2)** questions drive the student deeper, requiring you to make use of background information that I provide within the study and/or the use of outside sources such as commentaries. These questions will also make use of cross-referencing other texts outside of these two letters.
- **Level Three (L3)** questions you will find are for everyone, regardless of your Biblical understanding, as they ask you to reflect on the lesson through the eyes of your own faith, the culture in which you live and the effect of modern-day events on your faith. Therefore, they do not typically come with right-or-wrong answers, but instead are useful for locating where you are in your own faith-walk. I urge you to answer them, even if they are difficult, knowing that many will not be discussed openly in the live class unless you choose to do so.

As mentioned above, I will from time to time provide side pieces of background information for use in this study. These may include information about archaeology, history, biography and many others. This information should be helpful not just in answering questions but in furthering a wider understanding of what was happening during the time of these two letters.

As a Methodist pastor, I am steeped in Wesleyan theology when I read Scripture. It is the primary lens I use when studying. Therefore, you will find scattered throughout each chapter quotes from John Wesley's notes. Some will be focused specifically on a given passage, while others may look at a wider theological point. I hope you will enjoy these.

Finally, I suggest the following methodology for using this study.

First, pray. Since these letters are a part of Holy Scripture, it is proper to treat them as such and not as just an interesting ancient text. Before you read a single word of the weeks' Scripture or start researching questions, pray that God will divinely reveal wisdom and understanding to you.

Second, just read. Read the Scriptures for that lesson - *without studying them*. I suggest you read the provided passage 2-3 times a day for the first 2-3 days. This will familiarize you with the content of the text without being distracted by looking for answers to questions and missing important details.

Third, now begin exploring the chapter. Take whatever time you wish to complete each chapter, but don't be afraid to go back to previous answers and change them if new information later makes you rethink your answers.

Fourth, note repeated words and phrases. In ancient times there was very little literacy and thus in order to emphasize a point, words and phrases were repeated to draw the attention of the reader.

Finally, at the end of each session of study, *pray again*. This time your prayer should be to thank God for what He has revealed to you during your study - even if you are not aware of what may have been revealed! God works in moments of clarity and in the accumulation of information to help you "connect the dots". Give thanks for that.

So, enjoy this study, pray often, thank God for revelation and allow God to increase both your faith and understanding! Let's get started.

LESSON ONE

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Let's begin our story from before 1 Thessalonians was written. It is important to know a bit about the apostle Paul, the town of Thessalonica and why Paul was writing a letter to them in the first place.

Paul was actually named Saul by his parents. He grew up in a Jewish family, probably in the city of Tarsus. His family was apparently well educated which meant they were probably financially well-off and perhaps involved in civic and/or religious leadership themselves. So, Saul was born into a privileged life, becoming well educated himself and as we find out in his own writings (Phil. 3:4-6), very zealous for the Jewish faith. Zealous enough in fact, that as he grew in stature among his fellow leaders, he found this new "Jesus movement" to be a threat to the purity of Jewish thought and life. He was given authority to find those who were part of this growing threat and bring them to justice, sometimes to the point of death (Acts 9:1-2). On one such occasion Saul was on his way to round up more of these apostates when Christ met him on the road to Damascus and changed his life forever. If you have never heard the details of this story, please read Acts 9:1-19, it is quite a remarkable witness.

After that conversion experience, Saul discovers that God is calling him to bring the word of salvation through Jesus Christ, not only to his brothers and sisters in the Jewish faith, but also to any gentiles who would listen. At this time, the word "gentiles" referred to anyone who was not Jewish. They were considered second class humans by fundamentalist Jews because they were not blessed by God as the Jewish people were. Saul had grown up with this theology, so you can imagine how difficult it must have been for him not only to join this group whom he had been persecuting, but also to take this message to people whom he had previously disdained simply because of who they were.

The believers in Jesus had known Saul from his previous way of life and were understandably frightened (and wary) that he was now presenting himself as "one of them" to be of service to the growing community of believers. (They were not yet called Christians - that comes later - Acts 11:26). Saul did have a companion, however, to help with the transition, a believer named Barnabas. Barnabas was instrumental in Saul's early days as a leader and went with him on several missionary journeys as a sort of mentor. Somewhere in all this, Saul's name was changed to Paul (Acts 13:9) but we are not given any reason why this happened. This process of Paul travelling across the Middle East, western Asia and Europe (the Roman world then) became his life, moving from town to town to bring the news, the good news (the Greek word here is *gospel*) first to the Jews in those communities and then to gentiles

in those same communities. The message was largely, though not completely, rejected by the Jewish audiences and largely, though not completely, accepted by the gentile audiences.

So, Paul, often accompanied by others, travelled across these areas, bringing the gospel of Jesus which stirred both controversy and welcome. Those who welcomed the news began to meet with each other to learn more and to worship. This led to creating new communities of faith, which would eventually become Christian churches. Paul would typically start these churches, stay for a time (3 months - 18 months), train leadership and then move on to a new city, leaving a companion behind for further instruction and organization who would usually rejoin Paul sometime later.

For our study, the church in Thessalonica was one of those early communities which Paul visited and set up a church. This has been referred to as Paul's first missionary journey. Some time later (perhaps within a year) Paul is preparing for his next journey into Europe to bring the message of Jesus to additional cities. As he is doing so he writes these two letters to the community in Thessalonica. There is some thought that the first letter is written in response to stories he has received about the growth of the church there and the second letter may be in response to a letter that the church wrote to Paul (which we do not have). Academia believes these to be the first two letters that Paul writes. With all that backdrop, let us start looking at some questions about Chapter 1:1-10.

The chapter begins in verse one with Paul introducing two disciples who are with him at the time of the writing, Silvanus (who is also referred to as Silas) and Timothy, a young disciple who is being mentored by Paul. He addresses the group as the *church* in Thessalonica. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia* is a Greek word to describe any gathering of people who have a common purpose for meeting. In today's world that could be a religious gathering or something like the Lion's Club. But one of the things we see happen in the growth of early church is how often words and phrases of common usage become "Christianized". The common usage takes on a more technical use within the believers.

That is also true of how verse one finishes with the words "grace and peace" as his greeting. The word here for "grace" is a common Greek opening in a letter and the word for "peace" is a common greeting in Hebrew among the Jewish people. Similar to the way that today we commonly begin a letter to someone we know with a phrase like; *Dear Aunt Dorothy,...* Thus, Paul draws from both influences in the world of his day to greet the church.

As we continue with verses 2-3, Paul continues to use common letter writing practice with a list of things about the community for which he gives thanks to God. In the space provided, list the three characteristics he mentions about this community.

L1

Characteristic one -

Characteristic two -

Characteristic three -

In verse three, Paul introduces three more common terms which are going to become standards for all of Paul's ministry, *faith, hope and love*. The Greek word for *faith* is the same word that is translated as *belief*, so they are interchangeable. In Greek there are three common words used for *love*. One of those is *eros*, which describes sexual love. This word is never found in the Greek New Testament. The second word is *philea*, which describes a "brotherly love", deeper than *eros*, usually retained for use when talking about family relationships. (Hence the name of the city of *Philadelphia*. The final word used in Greek is *agape*, describing a deep, unearned, undeserved love that knows no bounds. It is this word, *agape*, that is used here and often when describing love in the Christian community.

How would you define the way Paul explains the difference between faith, hope and love? The first is given as an example to show you what I am looking for.

L2

Faith - is evidenced through works

Hope -

Love -

Moving on to verse 4, Paul speaks to the church about their *election* or being *chosen* by God. This word has created deep and lengthy discussions throughout the history of Christianity and became a source of great division theologically. This is often referred to as *predestination*, which we will not address in depth here. For our purposes, the discussion is more centered on the idea that God has “chosen” them as individuals to become a “people”. This is God’s invitation, through Paul, for them to come away from their identity as Jews or as gentiles, to join together and form a new community, with a new focus (salvation), with a new center (Jesus Christ) and a new mission (the eventual transformation of the world).

On their own, these people will never be able to accomplish such lofty goals. Others have tried and all have failed. But in verse 5, Paul describes the key to how this can and must happen. He states that the gospel message has come to them in both *word* and *power*. What is Paul’s evidence for this in the Thessalonian community?

L2

Evidence of both word and power:

Wesley made comments about the fact that the *word* came not just as words of men discussing the latest thoughts on religion and philosophy. The word of God came with *power* and that power was visibly seen. Wesley believed that power did not end with the First Century but continued whenever and wherever the gospel was preached.

Wesley said: *Piercing the very heart with a sense of sin and deeply convincing you (the believer) of your want of a savior from guilt, misery and eternal ruin. With the Holy Ghost - bearing an outward testimony, by miracles, to the truth of what was preached...And these signs, if not the miraculous gifts, always attend the preaching of the gospel, unless it be in vain; neither are the extraordinary operations of the Holy Ghost ever wholly withheld, where the gospel is preached with power, and men (people) are alive to God.*

In verses 6-10, Paul commends the people for how he witnessed them become imitators of his group (and vicariously then imitators of Christ) when they accepted the word in the midst of tribulation, resulting in joy brought about by the Holy Spirit. The tribulation or suffering that Paul is speaking about comes from at least two sources. First, for the believers who had come from a Jewish background, the suffering came from family and community as well. The Jewish community in the first Century was very closed to influence by the outside world (or they tried) but religious influence was considered apostasy. When these believers declared that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, they were typically ostracized. They were cut off from family gatherings, from shopping in the Jewish markets, from attending Jewish religious services and disowned. They were a people without a people. The gentiles did not have it much better. Their communities worshipped many gods, including the emperor as a god. For them to turn their backs on these gods and worship the One, True God, was an act of insanity. Relationships would be strained, people would be avoided and they would be looked upon with great skepticism. But an additional layer of persecution was at hand also. Rome believed that its success depended upon pleasing the gods...*all* the gods. Thus, whenever Rome conquered a country, their gods were usually just added to the list of Roman gods to be worshipped. Every Roman citizen was then expected to worship them as well. The thought was, that if any group of people refused to worship all the gods, this would displease them, and the blessings would be withdrawn.

This had already been challenged by the Jews. They refused to worship anyone other than Yahweh, even to the point of death. But Rome also recognized the value of the Jewish people in that Israel was in the ideal geographic location, through which travelers (understood as commerce) moved from north and south between Europe and Africa and from East to West between Rome and the far East. Rome's compromise was to allow Israel (Jews) to practice their faith so long as they remained vassals to Rome and paid their taxes.

Now a new group was forming, with a quickly growing community of believers who also would not only refuse to worship the Roman gods, but also proclaimed a belief that their Savior would return and usher in a new kingdom, with Jesus as their king. This was unacceptable to Rome and no compromise would be given to Christians. So, depending on the level of wrath of whomever was Emperor at the time, the Christian community suffered at the hands of the Empire.

As the Christian community was comprised of converts from both Judaism and Roman paganism, they were persecuted from all sides. This was to be true of every Christian community located anywhere in the Roman Empire.

But the church in Thessalonica became known for its faithfulness and resilience in the face of its persecution. So much so, that their reputation spread throughout the

churches being formed. They became an example of how to remain faithful and obedient despite the challenges to their faith.

This brings us to a very personal question, a Level Three question.

L3

Today, at least in the United States, there is very little persecution of our faith, certainly not on the level that the Thessalonians faced. But reflect on your own life, its past and its present. Have you ever faced any form of persecution or ridicule or opposition because of your faith? Use this space to give a brief explanation of this.

As we close this section by looking at verses 9-10, Paul is encouraging the people to remember who Jesus is, the Son of God, who now reigns in heaven with God the Father and that someday, Jesus will return to deliver the people from the *coming wrath*. The central point of that belief is also found in verse 10. What is the central belief that the believers have in common about the identity of Jesus?

L1

Central point of Jesus' identity is his -

Here is one last question for everyone about your own faith walk. In verse 10, Paul speaks about the people waiting for the return of Jesus from heaven. At this point in his faith walk, Paul believed the return of Jesus was imminent (as we will discuss later). As his faith grew and time went on, Paul began to change his mind about the *timing* of Jesus' return and simply focus on how we should conduct our lives here until Jesus does return.

How about you? How would you describe your sense of *waiting* for the return of Jesus? Are you expectant? Mildly interested? Don't really think about it much? Write your answer in the space provided.

L3

LESSON TWO

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

As we now move into the study of Chapter Two, again some helpful background information will be useful. One of the consequences of setting up a new church in Thessalonica was the push back not only that Paul would face but also the new community after Paul had left. Details of this story can be found in Acts 17:1-10. The Jewish community in town had raised quite a revolt against Paul and Silas and went looking for them to have them arrested. But the believers had sequestered both of them to protect them. A man named Jason had been housing Paul and Silas, so the mob went to his home, dragged Jason before city officials, jailed him along with some other believers for the night, then released them. Meanwhile, the new community of believers secretly Paul and Silas away to the next town of Berea.

But the persecution did not end with their absence. In the next several months those in Thessalonica who opposed Christianity began to accuse the church of all sorts of crimes, but they especially laid into Paul and Silas, creating false narratives that the two of them were only in it for the money, or that Paul and Silas had defrauded the people. Basically, the opposition tried to tear away at the character of Paul and Silas as well as all the work they had done in creating a new community.

This would not be the last time Paul would face such accusations. In the Scriptures you are reading this week, Paul writes his defense against these accusations, not only defending himself but also appealing to the memory of the believers. They had seen with their own eyes and had their own personal experiences with Paul and Silas. Paul asks them to remember what they knew first hand rather than give any credence to the claims made by those who were not there. Let's move through the material one verse at a time beginning with this Level Three question:

L3

Have you ever had to defend yourself or your character against someone making false accusations against you? Use this space to write a few notes about what that experience felt like.

As Chapter Two begins, Paul appeals to the memory of the people who had first-hand experiences with his ministry. He reminds them that facing opposition was a part of what “came with the territory”, which they had previously experienced in the town of Philippi (you can find this in Acts 16:19-24 and Acts 17:5-9) before arriving in Thessalonica (vss. 1-2). Paul then addresses some of the issues raised by the opposition - impure motives and trickery (vs.3) as well as flattery and greed (vs.5).

Human inclinations as they are, people had no doubt faced charlatans before, either religious leaders, political leaders or any other form of “snake oil salesman”. Some had been believers of these leaders and had been hurt by them, financially or otherwise. Others had been damaged more in their reputations and standing in the public eye. Whatever the case, people were rightfully wary of the latest and greatest thing to be brought before them.

But there was something about the message of Paul and Silas that was different. Paul reminded them that their message was from God, not from themselves. Okay, so far, but they had probably encountered false prophets before. Paul then claims that they were not trying to do this to gain any notoriety for themselves or even seek human approval (vs.4).

In verse 4, Paul also states that God, “...tests our hearts.” A note to help what that may mean. In these days, people generally believed that the brain was where one’s soul/spirit resided. The heart was thought to be the place of intelligence, thought processes and imagination and the entrails (especially the stomach) were the location of emotion. When Paul says that God was testing their hearts, he is probably speaking about God testing their thoughts and words, to make sure that they lined up with God’s. This is why Paul speaks about God *trusting them* (vs.4), *testing them* (vs. 4) and then being a *witness* for them (vs. 5).

As Paul continues his defense in verses 6-7, he again reiterates that they were not seeking human approval but only approval from God for being faithful to their calling to spread the word about Jesus and to do so correctly. But then he inserts a bit of a challenge. In verse 6, Paul says that he could have “...asserted his authority...” because he was an *apostle* of Jesus Christ.

The word apostle, In Greek, refers to “one who is sent”. Originally it did not have a religious connotation to it at all. Anyone of a position of authority could order his citizens or followers or members to be obedient to their directions. But the leaders could not always be physically present to deliver such orders. Therefore, they selected people to represent them, to proclaim a message *just as though* the leader was present. That full authority rested with the representative so long as that person delivered the message correctly, without error or amendment.

Thus, for Paul, his position as an apostle meant that he was the sent representative of God Almighty, delivering a message which originated with Christ, not with himself. Although Paul was not God, he was God’s messenger or apostle and thus carried with him a level of authority synonymous to God’s.

But then Paul backs off from this somewhat heavy-handed approach and reminds the people that neither he nor Silas used that authority in an oppressive way, but instead treated the people as though they were children among the people, in a gentle rather than authoritarian way. He then changes the analogy to that of being like a nursing mother, caring for the people with love (vs.7-8).

L2

How differently do you think the message of the gospel would have been received had Paul *rightfully* asserted his authority rather than delivering the message with care and love?

Paul next returns to reminding the people of their own “expert witness” of how Paul and Silas had lived among the people. In verses 9-12, Paul asks the people to *remember* how hard he and Silas worked, rather than demand the people take care of their needs. Maybe there had been previous examples of such leaders expecting or even demanding that they would have their physical needs (lodging and food?) and financial needs taken care of in exchange for their leadership. But Paul asks them to think back and see whether or not they had been such a burden to the people (vs.9). He appeals to *their witness* (vs.10), not just his own argument, that these claims are true.

L1

Who else does Paul claim as a “witness” to his actions in verse 10?

Regarding verse 10, Wesley speaks about Paul's use of the words *holy, justly and unblameable*. **Wesley said**, "*Holy, in the things of God. Justly, with regard to men. Unblameable in respect of themselves*. For Wesley, "holiness of heart and life" are at the center of the Christian life. That holiness, as a result of God's Spirit in our lives, leads to action, which he then describes as just (the way we treat others) and unblameable, in regard to obedience to God.

Paul then switches to another parental analogy in verse 11, now describing himself in a fatherly image, encouraging, comforting and urging the people to live their lives in such a way as it would bring honor and glory to God, not to himself. Such was the role of an apostle, one who has been given authority, yet is expected to exercise that authority in a way that encouraged participation rather than demanding it.

In verses 13-16 Paul returns to his words of thanksgiving for the people of Thessalonica, because of their faithfulness and obedience to God's word and how they lived it out in their daily lives. He commends them that they had received the gospel as *God's word* not just the ramblings of humans.

L2

What is the *evidence* Paul gives in verses 13-16 that the people received the message as God's word and not just human argumentation?

Finally, in verses 14-16, Paul addresses the issue of the people who were *causing* the suffering of the believers, whether from a geo-political perspective or a religious one. Paul tells the people that this has been happening in other churches and even began with the persecution and death of Jesus himself by his own Jewish community. Paul states that the actions of the opposition have displeased God and that their sins will be brought against them some day. But take notice in verse 16 of what Paul sees as the ultimate purpose for the persecution of the Gentiles - to keep them from hearing the gospel and thus be saved! The end game in all of Paul's ministry is salvation for all who would believe in the name of Jesus Christ.

L3

One last Level Three question: Non-believers today still show great skepticism and sometimes opposition to the efforts of Christians to evangelize the world for Jesus Christ. Why do you think that is still the case?

LESSON THREE

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17 - 3:13

This week we finish Chapter Two and read through all of Chapter Three. There are a few significant issues we will deal with during this reading, especially the person of Satan. But before we go there, let me take you on a little trip down memory lane.

Think about someone in your past who was a close personal friend. That person could even be a relative, but whoever they are, they were close to you, someone with whom you had a great relationship, but then...something happened.

Not anything catastrophic, mind you, more like...one of you moved away, or one of you got married and started a family. In other words, you became physically separated but not because the relationship itself fell apart.

In the time after that separation, did you miss them? Did you find opportunities to visit them? On a regular basis? Or did the visits start often, but due to changes in life, the in-person visits became less and less frequent? How did you keep up with each other? Did it become more difficult or did you find ways around it? Did you even plan to visit but something came up that kept the visit from happening? Without going into great detail, use the space below to jot some notes about one of those experiences.

L3

I have had many such experiences because of my profession as a United Methodist pastor. I am appointed to a church in some Texas town, but only stay there 4-6 years before the Bishop decides it's time for me to move somewhere else. At my current church, I have completed 11 years of service, my longest stay ever. In each of those places some members of those congregations have become more than congregants, they became friends. And we carried on those friendships over the years. But, as time went on, conversations with those earliest friendships became less frequent or stopped altogether. Not because there was a problem between us, but because life happened.

This is similar to what you are about to read in the passage this week. After Paul set up the church in Thessalonica, he moved on to set up the next church and the one after that and so on. In this first of his letters back to this church, he remembers the people there fondly, especially about their love for him and their faithfulness to Jesus Christ and the message of salvation.

In the first Century, writing letters to keep up with people was difficult and expensive, so keeping a relationship going was equally as challenging. Paul wanted desperately to re-visit the church to see how they were doing. But he could not do so because of his ministry and because of a spiritual adversary. But he is, however, able to send Timothy, one of his proteges, back to the people to get a first-hand account of how they are doing.

What you are studying this week is a look into Paul's heart for these people, the great joy of how they are faring and the heartache of not being able to be there in person to see for himself and to rekindle those relationships.

Certainly, watch for all the theological issues that I will address with you, but pay attention to the "feel" of Paul's words as well.

As we finish Chapter Two and move through the entirety of Chapter Three during this lesson, we read that Paul apparently had plans to visit the people of Thessalonica but those plans were thwarted. Paul's direct accusation for the cause of the delay is Satan! It is worth our time here to present an understanding of the word used here and the accompanying theology of the character of Satan throughout the Scriptures.

Before we move however, I think it is timely to look a bit deeper into the meaning and use of the word "Satan" for it has quite an interesting and insightful history. Such an aside within academic works is typically called an *excurses*.

Excurses on the word - Satan

The word *Satan*, from the Greek *satanas* and the Hebrew *hasatan* has a direct etymology of meaning *an accuser, an enemy, an adversary*. But the use of that word for a spiritual character who epitomizes evil has a much wider and deeper history.

From the earliest Scriptures in Genesis 3 we are introduced to *the serpent*. The Hebrew word for Satan is not used here at all. The connection of Satan to the serpent comes much later, in fact, thousands of years later. But, as we will see, the character of Satan will be given many names throughout Biblical history and it is the place of Biblical authors to connect them all to the same character.

The earliest place where we see the actual term *satan* used is in the story of Job. I describe this as a term rather than a name because of the way the word is presented in the Hebrew text. To be more accurate to the text, it would be appropriate to call him *the satan* rather than present the term as a proper noun. The first two chapters present the prologue for the story of why all these troubles plague Job. The satan is presented as an *adversary* to God, making accusations about the reasons that Job is so loyal to God. It is the satan who suggests various trials to God that he believes will cause the downfall of Job's faithfulness, with the proof being that Job will curse God to his face. But this character of the satan is not described as coming from hell or surrounded by demons. In fact, there is no description at all given concerning the satan. Only that he has the ability to show up in the throne room of God to present his case against Job. After these initial meetings in Chapters One and Two, the satan never appears again in the story. Job is never told that the cause of all his suffering was a test between God and the satan.

So where do we get the idea of a demonic, fallen angel as the leader of other fallen angels? In the canonized Scriptures there is very little reference other than perhaps Luke 10:18 and Revelation 12:1-9 which speaks of a great war that took place in heaven and Satan was thrown out along with his followers. It is here that the terms Satan, serpent and devil are presented as synonyms. Additional details of that war are found in a non-canonized texts including one called *How Satanail with His Angels Was Thrown Down from the Height*. It is but one story from a larger work known as *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, part of the Jewish Pseudopigrapha, which is a collection of Jewish stories written in the intertestamental time.

Other terms used in the Bible to describe Satan would include Beelzebub, Lucifer, prince of darkness and father of all lies, to name a few. The point of this is to introduce you to terms that evolve, change and grow throughout Scripture over thousands of years, based not only on cultural influences but also the continued revelation from God throughout that time period.

So, whether used as a description of this being's character or using that title as a proper name, we are clear of who we are referencing throughout these two letters. No doubt Paul knew all these stories and terms for Satan and used them as interchangeably as we do.

In addition, the term Satan would also be applied to other individuals in a figurative sense (Peter at Mark 8:33) or against world powers (perhaps Rome in this passage). Even so, Paul certainly believed there was evil power in this world, led by or influenced by the demonic forces of Satan and his demons.

That brings us to our next Level Three Question. Use the space in the box provided to answer this set of questions.

L3

Do you personally believe in the existence of Satan? If so, do you believe he has the power to influence human activity and how is that accomplished? If not, how would you describe the source of evil thoughts/actions in our world?

Let's continue through today's lesson. In verses 1-5 of Chapter 3, Paul continues his admiration for the people of the church in Thessalonica, he explains a bit more of the details of why he personally could not come visit them and that his solution was to send Timothy instead to encourage them and to check up on their progress in the faith. Here, Paul shows his concern for the people and the very great possibility that they might be persecuted, just as he was continually in persecution. Further, that Satan, now referred to as the tempter, would lead them away from their faith. It is highly important to remember that Christianity at this time is relatively brand new, still in the early stages of its separation from Judaism. There are no written texts of the New Testament yet and Paul is one of the early evangelists. There is no ready access to further learning and explanation of the faith, other than those whom Paul leaves behind or sends back to them, in this case, Timothy. The very real danger was not just persecution but also apathy, which would then lead to the people giving up on their faith in the face of opposition and/or neglect.

In fact, in verse 3, Paul tells the people that they should *expect* to be persecuted and suffer. Compare this to John 15:20 and answer the following question:

L2

Why should the people expect to face opposition?

Through verse 7 we then find out that while Paul and his friends were quite concerned about the new Christian community, once Timothy came back to him with good reports, their fears and anxieties were calmed. It is important to note that Paul does not dismiss his fears based on the idea that he was somehow falsely over-anxious about the very real possibility of their persecution, but that his fears were dismissed because in the face of that persecution and opposition, *their faith* remained firm.

If I may have a moment here to speak as a pastor, this is indeed one of the great moments of joy in our lives. We can preach great sermons, teach the gospel accurately and live out an authentic life of integrity as an example for others. We can warn and rejoice, bless and correct and hope the people get the message. But to watch people actually put their faith into action - that's the great joy that really makes a pastor know that they are doing some good in the life of a congregation. Look again at verse 3:7-8 for the answer to this next question:

L1

What two specific indicators about the Thessalonians' life does Paul mention that brings him encouragement?

While Paul and his friends are certainly overjoyed about the progress they heard about the faith life of this church, in verse 10, Paul drops a hint that they are not yet finished. Far from it. He notes that there are “deficiencies” in their faith. We will get to see what Paul had in mind in Chapters 4 and 5. But this gives us pause for another personal, Level Three question for you to answer:

L3

Paul will soon reveal deficiencies he sees in the life of the Thessalonian church. Today I like to think of our faith walk as involving three directions: *Upward* (our connection to God through things like worship and prayer), *Inward* (focused on our learning through study and our spiritual growth) and *Outward* (how we reach out to others in evangelism, missions and care).

If you take an honest evaluation of these three areas of your own faith, can you pinpoint a “deficiency”, a place where you know you need growth? Write about that here.

As we finish our study of this section, we hear what, in academic circles, is called a *doxology*. The word “doxology” simple means “words of glory”. Think about our traditional worship services and how we typically sing a doxology after receiving the offering. *Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below. Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

Check these words against verses 11-13 and note the similarities. A doxology can be found often in Scripture, in either Testament, but typically in this sort of formula in the New Testament. It always involves raising praise and glory, it is always aimed at the members of the Trinity (whether all three are specifically mentioned or not), and it usually concludes with the word “Amen”, which is actually a Hebrew word meaning “so be it”.

For this particular doxology, it is also important to see what Paul is asking for God to do for the benefit of the people of Thessalonica. In verse 11, Paul asks God to “direct our ways”. The Greek word used for “direct” has the connotation to “correct or make straight”. Paul is relying on God to provide such direction to make the pathway clear, but then also depends on God to correct him if he ends up going astray.

In verse 12 the request is for God to enlarge our ability/capacity to love one another. The theological premise behind this is that humans discover that we are not able to do this very well on our own, so we need the power of an outside force to make such changes within us. That outside force is the Holy Spirit and the changes required are from within ourselves first with the expectation that they are manifested in our actions.

Finally, in verse 13, Paul is hopeful that such changes bring us to a place of *holiness*. Holiness is not to be equated with moral perfection. The word itself is a term from geometry that describes, for example, drawing a circle. A circle is a line that encompasses 360 degree arc. If you begin but only draw an arc of 359 degrees, then your circle is *incomplete*. The idea behind holiness is not that we become unable to sin any longer, but that we reach a place where we have all the necessary instruction, relationship, gifts of the Spirit, etc... to be complete. This is a major theme in all of John Wesley’s sermons and writings. One of those writings was titled, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* and was edited often from 1725 until 1777. Below is an excerpt from his writings that explains it in his own words:

Wesley wrote:

A Methodist is one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul, which is continually crying "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth whom I desire but Thee." My God and my all. "Thou art the strength of my heart and my portion forever." He is therefore happy in God; yea always happy, as having in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life, and overflowing his soul with peace and joy. Perfect love having now cast out fear, he rejoices evermore. Yea, his joy is full, and all his bones cry out, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten me again unto a living hope of an inheritance uncorruptible and undefiled, reserved in heaven for me.

And loving God, he loves his neighbor as himself, he loves every man as his own soul. He loves his enemies, yea, and the enemies of God. And if it be not in his power to do good to them that hate him, yet he ceases not to pray for them, though they spurn his love, and still despitefully use him and persecute him.

Thus, for Wesley, perfection was not equated with moral purity but with intention of the heart and willingness to submit to God regarding love for God and others. As an ordained pastor in the United Methodist Church, part of our ordination process involves standing before the bishop and answering what are known as "Wesley's historic questions". These are a series of questions that John Wesley asked of all his preachers before he would turn them out to serve a congregation. One of those questions was/is; *Do you believe you are going on to perfection?* As a candidate for ordination, your answer had better be - YES! But as a Christian with a Wesleyan bent, this question should be asked of us all - clergy or laity. What's the answer for you?

LESSON FOUR

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Principles and particulars. This is a phrase that I use often when exploring the ancient Scriptures to address a modern issue. Quite often someone has asked me a question that starts off with “*What does the Bible say about _____.*” And you can fill in the blank. I then start researching the Word of God to find an answer for them. Because there has been 2000 years of time between Biblical days and modern times, what I find typically is that the *particular* topic someone has in mind is not found in Scripture, usually because it did not exist yet or because Scripture simply did not address it. I must then look in the Scriptures for a *principle* that would guide the discussion, regardless of the time period of the person asking. That can be tricky because you have to be careful not to insert 21st Century understanding into an ancient text, but instead, allow the text to declare its truth and then you try to make the appropriate modern analogy. Even greater danger is found in that step.

As we turn to the first part of Chapter Four today, we find Paul in the midst of a discussion where he turns from principles to particulars. Apparently, the congregation in Thessalonica has asked specific questions about the proper way to behave as a Christian and how that is different from their previous way of life as a Jew or a pagan. These principles and particulars they would already have learned from family, rabbis, local religious leaders and history. But under the teachings of Jesus, they want to know what has changed, if anything, so they can do their best to live according to the direction of God and please Him.

Reading “between the lines” you might say, Chapter Four seems to address particular questions about sexuality (a very personal approach) and dealing with others (a societal approach). The Church universal has addressed that issue throughout its history, regardless of geographic location or time in history. How do we view our responsibility, as Christians, to ourselves, the Christian community and the world as a whole? Are we responsible only for ourselves and take the approach of “live and let live”? Or do we offer the teaching of Christ as an alternative to secular thinking? Or are we mandated by God to go out and change the world by any means possible? Once again, let’s start with a Level Three question to put you in the same frame of mind as the original audience.

L3

Looking over your lifetime thus far, how would you describe society's response to the moral teachings of the Church?

In the previous section, Paul has addressed his reasons for not returning, his great love for the people in Thessalonica and his great joy of hearing how well the people were living out their faith in Jesus Christ. With that encouraging start, he now addresses two very specific areas of practical living in the Greco-Roman world. In verses 1-2, he reminds them that they have already learned *principles* of holy living and that he expects that they will not only keep on living by these Christian standards, but also grow in their holiness and mature both in knowledge and in practice.

Verse 3 begins with the principle for what is to follow - *It is God's will that you should be sanctified*...The Greek word for sanctified comes from the same root for the word that is translated as "holy". A quick reminder, that the understanding of the word holy means "to be set aside for some purpose". It was not equated with moral perfection. When applied to Christian life it refers to living according to God's standards rather than the world's standards. The process of sanctification refers to those daily, small changes in a person's life exhibited by their thoughts, words and actions to be more Christlike. This process is always spoken of in the passive voice, meaning that it is not something we achieve on our own or do for ourselves, but rather, something that happens to us, as result of an outside force. We know that outside force to be the Holy Spirit. We typically gain and fall back, gain and fall back, hopefully with an overall growth and maturity over time.

The next question will require you to think across the whole of Scriptural teaching for an answer.

L2

Why is it *necessary* for sanctification to be something that God does to us rather than something we would strive to accomplish on our own?

The topic of sanctification is one of the central themes found in Wesleyan theology. It is a type of grace that John Wesley described in the life of a believer. The short version of Wesley's growth in grace is the following: first we experience what Wesley called *preventing grace* (now rewritten as *prevenient grace*). This is the grace of God that is acting in our lives before we ever become aware of grace or even aware of the presence of God. At some point we do become aware not only of God's presence but also of His power to cause us to become aware of our sin and our response to seek His forgiveness. This Wesley referred to as *justifying grace*, where God forgives us and justifies (or corrects) our relationship with Him. The next step in the grace module is *sanctifying grace*, which is the focus of our study today. As noted above, it is the slow and steady growth in ourselves, conducted by the Holy Spirit, with our response to that Spirit, which begins to change us more into the image of

Christ himself. There is a fourth stage of grace which Wesley spoke of as *final grace* (or final perseverance as Wesley used the term) from which no human can fall back.

Wesley also spoke of the *means of grace*, which referred to actions that human can participate in which make us more readily open to the work of God's sanctifying grace. Again, we do not control the process, but we are given the opportunity to *participate* with the Holy Spirit in sanctification. Some of these means include; prayer, reading Scripture, Holy Communion and acting out our faith in good works.

Moving on to verses 3-8, Paul addresses the specific issue of sexual immorality. It may be obvious to us today about the great difference in the way Christians view human sexuality from the way Roman society did in Paul's day, but for a bit more insight, I present here excerpts from Dr. F.F. Bruce in his commentary in 1 Thessalonians and this topic in particular.

The idea of confining sexual intercourse within marriage was foreign to Greek conventional morality of the period. The general attitude is frequently illustrated by a quotation from Demosthenes's oration Against Neaera: "We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for our day-to-day bodily needs, but we have wives to produce legitimate children and serve as trustworthy guardians of our homes." That was the outlook of a reputable citizen of Athens in the fourth century B.C....It may be that Timothy, on his return from Thessalonica, reported an undesirable laxity in sexual relations in the church there.

Verses 4-6 are Paul's warning to the people to live their lives different from the non-Christian world. In verse four he calls the people to be "holy" (there's that word again), and be self-controlled (verse 5). Beyond just simple obedience to God's command, Paul presents another compelling reason for acting in this way as Christians. Our next Level Two question asks you to describe that reason.

L2

According to Paul in verse 6, what is the larger, societal reason for sexual purity?

Now move to verse 8 and answer the following Level One question:

In verse 8, Paul further makes the claim that rejecting his instruction on this matter is no different than rejecting whom?

How can he make such a claim?

Paul next switches the focus of his letter to a new subject, namely, how to go about daily life in such a way that it honors God and affects others in society. Verses 9-12 demonstrate that the Christian life should not only have a personal responsibility to holiness but a social one as well.

In verses 9-10, Paul begins by praising the Thessalonians for the way they have demonstrated love for one another. He begins by saying that he has no need to write to them about this because they have already learned the lesson of love and are living it out among each other, that is, the Christian family.

The word for “love” that is used here is worth spending some time exploring. In the ancient Greek language, there are three primary words used to describe love. The first of those is *eros* from which we derive the English word, erotic. This was used to describe sexual attraction at its most basic and common understanding. It is the physical love that we have for one another. Interestingly enough, the word *eros* is never used in the New Testament.

The second word for love is the Greek word *philea*. For Americans you can correctly make the connection that this is part of the name of the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Often referred to as the “city of brotherly love” that is grammatically right on. This type of love is the love any two people could have for one another as close friends. It does not involve a component of *eros*, but instead describes how two people or a community can encourage one another, rejoice with one another, grieve with one another. It describes a relationship which is more than a casual acquaintance but not the same kind of love that a married couple would have.

That brings us to the third word used in Greek for love - *agape*. Agape love is almost indescribable, because words often fall short. It is the deep, compassionate, self-sacrificing love that husband and wife should have for one another, and that parents should have for their children. But it can be on a community level as well. Christians are called to have this type of love for one another as well. The key element in *agape* love is that of putting someone else's needs above your own. We see this type of love demonstrated most clearly by God, who sacrificed his son, Jesus, for the salvation of the world. *Agape* love is described as unmerited and undeserved. Even so, there are not enough words to completely explain this level of love, but you know it when you see it!

With that in mind, let me now present verse 9-10 substituting the Greek words for love in the midst of the English text:

“Now about your *philea* for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to *agape* one another. And in fact you are doing it to all God's family throughout Macedonia”. (Some translations use the word love in place of “doing it” in verse 10, but the Greek is a reflexive of *philea* in verse 9, not using any of the actual words for love).

Now, perhaps more light is shed on Paul's use in 4:1 and in 4:10 imploring the people of Thessalonica to take their actions to a new level when he says to do so “more and more”. They are to be congratulated for being able to *philea* one another, this is wonderful and appropriate. But Paul wants more for them. He encourages them to *agape* one another because this is the kind of love that God has for each of them, and we are to mimic God's love in our relationships. Again, there is no condemnation for *philea* but there is more that they are capable of - *agape* love.

Here, then, is your next Level Three question:

Finally, Paul now turns his attention to what should be the result of loving one another - outward conduct that is evidence of the inward love. His audience no doubt faced numerous challenges in working out their faith in the midst of a community that could be skeptical or even aggressive toward them. But in verse 11 Paul mentions three very simple actions which could go a long way to resolving any animosity or fear that non-believers might have. What are they?

The first of your answers would be to lead a quiet life. The Greek text actually is rendered as “be ambitious for a quiet life” perhaps underlining Paul's zeal for them

L1

1-

2-

3-

L3

Now that you know the difference between *philea* and *agape* love, make a list of 5-10 people whom you would place into each of those categories. You need not bother with casual acquaintances yet, just your top 5-10 people with whom you are in some kind of relationship.

Philea relationships include:

to do this. Part of that may have stemmed from the belief that Jesus was going to return at any minute and thus the newly formed Christian community was stirred by the thought and thus became enthusiastic to the point of becoming quite irritating to the non-believing community around them. Further thought extended to the way the entire Christian community was seen by outsiders. The actions of only a few disciples could affect the way the movement as a whole was seen by the larger community. Paul's hope was that the Christian community would indeed effect the others, but in a positive way.

The second of the answers from verse 11 was to "mind your own business". Apparently, for many, their enthusiasm for the return of Jesus led them to a style of evangelism that pushed beyond limits of proper behavior. While Paul certainly does not want to squash the movement of the Spirit, he also does not want the people to bludgeon the people into faithful submission to the gospel message. The message of Jesus is one of love and mercy, but it looks like some took the right message and delivered it in such a way that it actually caused people to flee from the message rather than run towards it. (In my younger days we referred to these people as "Jesus freaks".)

Finally, the third direction Paul gives the people was to work with their own hands. Academic thought on this primarily is focused on how many people who

believed the return of Jesus was imminent, began to slack in their work, in their family and societal responsibilities and thus became a burden on the Christian community as well as pagan society. Paul's admonition to work with their hands may have also rubbed the elite of society wrong as many Greeks believed that manual labor was beneath them, while Paul actually demonstrated that working with his hands (as a tent maker) was an act of humility and service to others, again an idea that was often seen as antithetical to the "normal" way of life.

While these three directives were positive in themselves, there was a greater purpose for the believers to live this way. That purpose is found in verse 12 - "...so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders..." It is very doubtful that Paul has any concern about what we today would call "political correctness". He wants the gospel message of Jesus out there boldly and lived out in the public eye. The "outsiders" were no doubt non-believers. So, why would Paul instruct the people to pay any attention to them at all? Here is your final Level Two question.

L2 - Why would Paul, or anyone else, have concern about winning the respect of non-believers?

There is a second reason given by Paul for living according to these three directives and it has to do with not depending on others, literally in Greek - *to have need of nothing*. This probably ties into the directive of working with your hands but also to the greater idea that the Christian life should not become a burden to anyone. Certainly, the Church had as part of its mission to care for the sick and needy. But here the admonition is to not become one of the needy through laziness so that more resources were available to care for those who became needy out of no fault of their own.

Thus verses 9-12 give the Thessalonian community (and us) a way to fulfill the second part of the Great Commandment, to love others as ourselves. By doing so, believers also fulfilled the first part, to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. The Christian message then has a focus on personal piety and a communal message of serving others.

Let's wrap this discussion up with one final Level Three question:

L3

In what ways does your life reflect the idea of earning the respect of “outsiders”?

LESSON FIVE

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13 - 5:11

As Paul changes topics once again, he starts to answer two questions that must have been on the minds of the people, not only in Thessalonica, but probably everywhere Christianity had spread. The first question was “*What happens to us after we die?*” People have been asking that question since Adam and Eve and every culture and religion has tried to formulate an answer to it. It is not surprising, then, that people from two different cultural backgrounds (Jewish and Greco-Roman) would be intensely interested in how Christianity would address the issue.

The second question, much more particular to Christians, would have been “*When will Jesus return?*” This second question narrows the field of those who would have any interest, as those outside of the faith would not have any cares about such a question. But to the growing body of Christians, and especially to Paul, this question is not only tied to the first one, but it becomes a centerpoint to his faith, especially in his early letters.

Over the years as I have studied Paul’s letters, I have come to the following conclusion about Paul’s answer to question number two. It seems to me that in the early letters, like those to the Thessalonians, that Paul was convinced that Christ’s return was imminent, happening at any moment. Thus we see heavy emphasis on preparation in these letters. But his middle letters, such as to the Corinthians and Galatians, seem to have Paul’s timeline for the return of Jesus to that of “somewhere in our lifetime”. The rush doesn’t seem to be there, although there is still a message of preparation. In his later letters, like those to Timothy and to the church in Rome, Paul seems to have given up trying to predict Jesus’ return and resolved to be prepared for it at all times.

In today’s lesson you will hear that earliest understanding of the return of Jesus as happening quickly. You will also get Paul’s understanding of *how* Jesus will return, with some very specific details for the believers to be watching for in order to know that Jesus has arrived. It is in this section, specifically at 4:17 that you will hear about something called *the rapture*. More details when we get to that part of the study, but just this quick note. The use of the Greek word for rapture is found only in this letter. Rapture is not found in the gospels, nor in John’s Revelation. Again, more on that later in the study.

Let’s begin then, with these two questions on the minds of the people of Thessalonica, the mind of Paul, and probably in your minds as well. In fact, let this be your first Level Three question:

L3

From everything you have learned in the past, describe briefly your thoughts on the return of Jesus.

It is probable to surmise that people in the church in Thessalonica were concerned about their relatives who have recently died and they are looking for clarity on what will happen to them. There would no doubt have been a wide range of after-life theories coming from both the formerly Jewish side of the congregation and the formerly pagan side. The question Paul must now answer is - what does Christianity teach about life after death?

In 4:13, Paul begins to address the unstated question, but not only for information's sake but for the sake of those still living. He states his reasoning as two-fold: first that they are no longer ignorant, that is, without knowledge, and second so that they do not grieve as the rest of the world does. That short statement itself speaks volumes about what Paul believes about death and life after death. For Paul, resurrection is a given. As it happened for Jesus, so it will happen to all people. But for Paul, death does not bring only sorrow. Because of the resurrection, rejoicing is not only appropriate, but an act of faithfulness.

In verse 14, Paul hints at the idea of Christ's imminent return when he says that those who have died in the faith will return with Jesus! For Paul's belief then, resurrection for those people will happen immediately, so that the return trip with Jesus is possible. More details are coming about Jesus' return in the next few verses. But Paul believes this idea of the instant resurrection of the departed and their return should bring people joy and hope.

Then comes the first of many controversial statements by Paul. Verse 15 states that what Paul is about to declare is according to “...*the word of the Lord.*” What “word” is Paul referring to here? It is vital to point out here that at this time, there are no *written* texts about Jesus yet. Of all the letters, gospels, and epistles in the New Testament, it is believed that 1 Thessalonians is the earliest. For centuries it was accepted that Matthew’s gospel was the first of the gospels to be written but that has been superseded by the idea that Mark’s was written first. In either case, the timing of all the gospels is believed to be later than this letter of Paul’s.

The phrase “*word of the Lord*” does not require a written statement however. It has been used often to refer to the spoken word of God or a prophet. So, is Paul referring to teachings of Jesus that were passed on to him from someone like Peter or Barnabas? Did Paul receive direct word from the risen Jesus in a private conversation, as he expresses in Acts 18:9-10? We have no way of knowing. Whatever the source, it provides a level of authority to the next statements that Paul is about to make.

The return of Jesus was not a new teaching, Jesus himself had referred to it on a number of occasions as well as the angels who were at his ascension (Acts 1:11). But the time and manner of his return was (is?) a mystery. Paul begins to fill in some of the details in verse 16. That leads to our first Level One question:

L1

What are the three signs that Paul says will accompany the return of Jesus?

1-

2-

3-

The first of the three signs is the shout of command/word of command. The Greek is definitely a word used in military settings and found in only one other place in the entire Bible at Proverbs 30:27 in the Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. It is a word which when used in context expects an obedient response.

The second sign is the voice of an archangel. In the hierarchy of angelic beings, there are such creatures as seraphim and cherubim, various sorts of angels according to their function and then, at the top, archangels. In the New Testament this word appears only in Jude 9, but Jewish tradition listed seven archangels, among the better known being Michael (usually associated with warfare) and Gabriel (usually associated with bringing the news of the incarnation to Mary and Joseph). The word for angel, in both Greek and Hebrew, is translated as “messenger” and we can see that role played out often throughout the Scriptures. In the Scriptures they are rarely described at all, much less with wings and halos dressed in tunics. They are often described as filled with bright light and in the appearance of a human.

The third sign given by Paul for the coming of Jesus is the sound of the trumpet of God. Trumpet sounds are found in the Old Testament to precede important announcements. In the New Testament, blowing the trumpet can be found at Matt. 24:31, 1 Cor. 15:52 and Revelation 11:15. All are sounds that summon the attention of human beings to divine, heavenly action and pronouncements.

In this case, it is not only the humans on earth who are summoned to respond, but also those who have died in the Lord (vs.16). Once that has happened there is an extraordinary event described in verse 17, where Paul says that those who are still alive will be “caught up” with those rising from the dead, to meet in a sort of convergence with the Lord and his angels as they are descending from heaven. The word in Greek for this being “caught up” or “snatched” is the English word *rapture*.

There is no doubt that the concept of *the rapture* has garnered great attention in recent centuries by Biblical scholars and Hollywood filmmakers alike. While the word is not found in the Revelation of John, even the act itself is not mentioned, nor in the Old Testament prophecies, which Christians believe also point to the return of the Messiah. This is the only mention of this event anywhere in Scripture, yet it has become a centerpiece for end-times discussions. No doubt, it is one of many signs that accompany the return of Jesus, also known as the *Parousia*. But for Paul, at least, it is simply that, one more sign, remarkable as it may be. For Paul, it is the totality of these signs, that when taken all together, should make it absolutely clear and without question for believers to recognize. It is an event which joins together believers both living and resurrected together in the presence of God for all time. Thus, Paul can conclude, in verse 18, that these words are of great encouragement to the believers who are waiting for the return of Jesus and wondering what has

happened to their departed loved ones. A long way to go, to answer the original question which started this discussion.

How about a pause for a Level Two question?

L2

All of these events of the Parousia (the return of Jesus) are good news to the people of Thessalonica (and to us). But none of them are possible without the resurrection of Jesus. How does his resurrection tie into the hope of these events for believers?

After such a rousing declaration to help soothe the fears of the believers in Thessalonica, surely the next question on their lips would be, “*When? When will these things happen?*” Such a glorious event must be placed on the calendar, right? Whatever their hopes were about finding out, those were about to be crushed by Paul’s answer, “...*you do not need to know.*” Excuse me? But I want to know! I want to be ready.

Either Paul anticipated this question, or it was brought to him by Timothy from the people. Paul’s response must have been like throwing a bucket of ice water on the feverish crowd who just learned about the events of the Second Coming. Chapter Five opens with this sort of punch to the face, but Paul quickly gives them the reason why they do not need to know the date and time. It’s because they have heard of this before, at least the formerly Jewish believers had. In the Old Testament there were prophecies about something called “the day of the Lord” or “the great and terrible day of the Lord”. In the Old Testament, this phrase had been used in association with the coming of God Almighty from heaven to the earth to set things right again and re-

establish His kingdom. Christian theology had taken this idea of the coming of God as equivalent to the second coming of Christ, which carried the same outcome. The pagan converts would probably been aware of the history of this phrase from their Jewish-Christian brothers and sisters.

What becomes important, and confusing, for the people is the further description of how the day will arrive - *like a thief in the night*. (vs. 2) That phrase would bring comfort to believers and fear to non-believers. Why the difference?

L2

Why would there be so great a difference in how people would respond to the idea that the day of the Lord would come like a thief in the night?

One of the primary reasons for such a disparity in reaction is that of *expectations*. For believers, they are already in a state of watching and waiting, expecting the return of Jesus. For them it is a sign of hope for the end of tyranny and oppression and sin. It is welcome news, even if couched in language of a break-in. To the unbeliever, this would be a frightening event, again because of the *lack of expectation*. Since they did not believe in Jesus, they had no reason to believe these events would occur. They would be taken by surprise indeed by these events and thrown into panic just as if someone had broken into their home in the middle of the night. Life for the believer was about to become heavenly, life for the unbeliever was about to become hell.

Verse 3 goes on to describe how the suddenness of these events would give the unbelievers no time to change their minds and thus their disbelief would be the

evidence to convict them of their ways and the resulting judgment would be without challenge. There will be no escape.

Paul now returns to words of encouragement for the believers. In verses 4-11, he reminds the people that, because of their faith, there is no need for them to fear the wrath of God. Their faith in Jesus will keep them safe from destruction. They need only to “keep awake” and be vigilant. Paul uses imagery of darkness and light, again polar opposites, to describe the difference between believers and unbelievers. God will not mistake one for the other, the discrepancy will be clear and obvious. Darkness and night are analogous to unbelief and evil, while light and day are synonyms for righteousness and belief.

In verse 8, Paul uses this as a rallying cry for what the believers must do next. There will be no sitting around on the theological lazy-boy recliner! There is a call to action that involves some unexpected imagery perhaps. “...*let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet.*”

Breastplates and helmets would have been recognized as military apparel, but at first seem out of place in a discussion about discipleship. Here then is your next Level Two question: (You may want to reference Isaiah 59:17 as well).

L2

Explain the analogy between faith and love to a breastplate on the one hand and salvation to a helmet on the other.

Faith + love = breastplate

Salvation = helmet

For the soldier, breastplates and helmets are defensive armor, to protect one against harm. Part of the analogy here for believers coincides with the day/night analogy. When God's wrath comes what will protect the believer is their faith and salvation, obvious signs (equipment) that believers will have but unbelievers will not. They will be defenseless against the judgement of God. In fact, in verse 9, Paul states that believers were not appointed by God for wrath, the implication there, that God already had a means of safety for believers and these analogies of darkness and light and armor were for the understanding and comfort of the believer, not to help God discern who was who on the battlefield.

Paul wraps up this section in verses 10-11 by reminding the people again that God's intent for them is salvation. The whole story of Jesus, birth, death, resurrection and return, are all orchestrated with the salvation of believers as the final goal. Such foreknowledge and pre-planning on their behalf should indeed be encouraging to hear!

What did Wesley say?

Surprisingly, very little, at least about the events of the Parousia. He has much to say about the final judgment and what he called "final salvation". Wesley had most of his thoughts focused on what the believer should be doing in the time of waiting until to the return of Jesus. His emphasis was on being ready, but that involved much more than attention to one's personal piety. For Wesley, salvation was also tied into living a faithful life that served others.

As regards to the language of Jesus returning as a "thief in the night", Wesley did have this to say in his journal of February 28, 1763. That date had been predicted by many authorities and academics to be the date of Christ's return. Wesley wrote, "*I went to bed at my usual time and was fast asleep about ten o'clock...the utter absurdity of the supposition that the world was to end that night.*"

Much like Paul, Wesley had little concern for the details of when and how the return of Jesus would take place, only a firm belief that it would and the responsibility of believers was simply to prepare and watch!

LESSON SIX

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28

As Paul prepares to close out his letter, there are certain last minute instructions he wants to emphasize. This will become a standard format for Paul in the letters he writes throughout his life. Very few of these final instructions will have detail attached to them, either assuming the readers already knew what he was talking about, or that other leaders would instruct them in person.

These instructions primarily deal with relationships - relationships between the people and their leaders, relationships between each other and relationships between believers and the wider community. They not only have a practical value for daily living, but their greater value is that living according to these principles will bring glory to God, which is, for Paul the primary reason for all our words, thoughts and actions.

Many of these exhortations will show up again in later works of Paul and in more detail. One of them involves the fruit of the Spirit, which will show up most notably in Galatians 5:22-23. As you work through this lesson, be reminded that it is Paul's plan to visit the Thessalonians again some day to personally explain further details of growing and living according to Christ. Before that can happen, however, he will write a second letter to this congregation, which you will be studying in the remainder of this course.

Paul begins this section by exhorting the people to give appropriate honor to those leaders who are working there (vs.12-13). Paul had made quite an effort to make sure that the leaders he would leave behind to lead churches were not sitting around simply spouting moral advice. They were expected to work for a living, just as he had done by his own example. The modern term "tent-making ministry" came from his life among these churches. In addition, they had the responsibilities of caring, teaching and leading the spiritual lives of the people. Thus, Paul believes they are worthy of esteem or honor. It is not their *position* that should bring them such honor but their *function* as servants and their hard work in carrying out that function.

The next part of the closing of Paul's letter has to do with specific instructions for not only the leaders but the people as well. In verses 14-22, Paul lays out the basic actions that form the way of life for Christians. Verses 14-15 deal with how believers

are to relate to one another for the common growth of faith for everyone. Let's start there with a Level One question:

L1

List the four directives given in verse 14:

1-

2-

3-

4-

Paul calls the people to “admonish the disorderly”, probably better rendered as “instruct the loafers”. Apparently, there were some in the community who were satisfied with not engaging in the work of helping each other and instead waited for the community to tend to their needs. The word for “instruction” in Greek carries with it the note of disapproval of the actions (or lack of actions) by these members.

Comforting the fainthearted, is also a difficult phrase to translate into English. These fainthearted people were not scared or frightened easily, as the English word might infer. Rather, these were members of the community who felt that the service and work they gave to the community was lacking and inadequate, especially when compared to those who seemed to be shining examples of servanthood. There is not a false humility that is concerned here, it truly is a fear on the part of these people that they are not living up to the standard set by Paul and expected from the community. The community is therefore called to bring these people comfort and encouragement that perhaps they can do more, but that their work already has value to the well-being of the community.

Next Paul calls for them to “help the weak”. The Greek here can refer to those who are physically weak or to those who are spiritually weak. The word for “help” has

the sense of holding up something (or someone, in this case) in order to provide strength and stability.

Normally in a list of attributes or instructions, the list is created starting with the most important and ending with the least. In this case, however, just the opposite is true. The call to “be patient toward all” is the governing attribute to be used in guiding the actions of admonishing, comforting and helping, since one who does not have these needs could easily become impatient with those who do and end up considering them an unnecessary burden on the community.

Verse 15 adds another layer to the general attitude and actions expected of believers toward each other and toward non-believers as well. As noted earlier in this study there are no written gospels yet, but certainly the words of Jesus are being handed down in an oral manner throughout the growing Christian world. Here one can easily hear the words of Jesus found in Matthew 5:44-48 and Luke 6:27-36.

The next set of instructions are meant for everyone in the community but involve a more personal, inward reflection and actions. In verse 16 Paul begins with “rejoice at all times”. The words in Greek for joy or rejoicing and being happy are not interchangeable. Happiness has an inherent understanding of being temporary, something that is experienced “in the moment” but does not last. Joy, on the other hand, is more of a state of being that exists even when circumstances of a person’s life are difficult or even tragic. One can be happy at a birthday party, but the party comes to an end and the calendar moves forward a day. But joy is indicative of a deeper characteristic of a person. Even facing a tragedy such as the death of a loved one, for example, the joyful person will rightfully spend time in sorrow and grieving, but also finds joy in the new life that person has in Christ. The “in Christ” part is essential for joy to become part of the person’s true character. Paul’s understanding of this will be further developed by the time he writes the Letter to the Galatians, where I ask you to turn now for your next Level One question:

L1

Turn to Galatians 5:22-23, where Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit. How many of these do you see listed in 1 Thessalonians 12-28?

Paul follows with the commands to “pray at all times and give thanks in everything” in verses 17-18. The literal translation of praying at all times does not mean that one cannot speak or think of anything else in life, that would be impossible. Rather the thought is that there are no circumstances in life that would keep someone from praying. Good times or bad, prayers during rejoicing or suffering, prayers for the needs of self or others, there just is not any circumstance in which believers are not encouraged to pray.

The same holds true for giving thanks in all circumstances. This one can be tougher, especially in those moments of despair or persecution. For what reason do we give thanks in such dire circumstances? Pastorally that can be a tough answer to give someone, but scripturally, not so hard. We find often that it is necessary to give thanks to God for something, even before we see that prayer answered and even more so, when we see no apparent answer at all. The spiritual character trait involved here is gratitude. It is founded on the belief that God knows what is best for us, that God has not turned a deaf ear to us, and that God is still with us even when we do not see or feel any evidence for His presence.

Paul adds that this life style is God’s will for us, not as a punishing, demanding overlord, but that His will that continues to sanctify us, mold us into the likeness of Jesus and makes us effective ministers in His name. Obedience to God’s will is for our benefit, the benefit of others and for the glory of God.

Verse 19 introduces what can be a very confusing idea - *do not quench the Spirit*. The Greek verb for “quench” does bring to mind the idea of pouring water on a fire to put it out, just as it does in English. In its Biblical context, it is most likely associated with the gift of prophecy, which is brought up in verse 20. But the word prophecy itself conjures up very different pictures today than it did in Biblical times.

In today’s modern language, the word prophecy is most often used with the ability to tell the future. That can certainly be found in Biblical usage as well, but it is a minor usage in comparison to the number of times prophetic language refers to bringing a difficult word of God to the people. Warnings about being disobedient and unfaithful to God’s call are hallmarks of this kind of prophecy as opposed to forecasting future events.

Regarding *quenching* the Spirit then, the fear is that individuals with that gift would choose not to use it because the prophecy was always harsh or that the people themselves would hear the words of the prophet and then turn a deaf ear to them. In

either case, it is the Holy Spirit who is being ignored which results in disobedience to the third person of the Trinity.

In my own experience, I have a friend who is a pastor in a very charismatic church of another denomination, known for speaking in tongues, prophecy and such type of more demonstrative responses to the Spirit. The first time I visited his church was on a Sunday when I had a day off. I typically use those opportunities to visit non-Methodist churches so I can see what everyone else is doing. As I was sitting in the pew watching the pre-worship slides, I was anticipating hearing someone speak in tongues, or prophecy, maybe even someone fall out in the Spirit during a prayer time. Slide after slide went by announcing the latest information on a youth gathering or an upcoming Bible study when a slide came across that said something like - *Don't forget members, remain in your seats during the worship service.* My first reaction was - noooo!

A few weeks later I received a phone call from the pastor (as I had signed in as a first time visitor) who wanted to know more about me. During the call I revealed that I was a pastor myself and was there to enjoy the experience. I told him of how wonderfully I had been greeted by his parishioners, that the music was great and his sermon was wonderful. He then asked me if there was anything about the experience that I did not like. Gulp! I proceeded to explain my expectations and what had happened. He understood completely and explained that it is indeed their theology of the gifts of the Spirit that the more demonstrative gifts are still given and used. But, he also discovered that when such demonstrations happen in Sunday morning worship, that it scares off first-time visitors who do not know ahead of time what to expect. Therefore the church leadership had made the decision to restrict that behavior on Sunday mornings and let loose on Wednesday evenings, since there were rarely first-time visitors to those events. My immediate response was to ask him whether or not he considered that to be a quenching of the Spirit. He admitted that he struggled with that very idea, but relented when placing it alongside the Biblical command to put no stumbling block before new believers. A careful dance indeed between being faithful to one's beliefs and welcoming to the uninitiated.

For the church in Thessalonica, that sort of balance was helped with the next verse. Not only could prophetic language become a barrier to new believers, but it probably gained a fair amount of skepticism as well. Is this just a show? So, Paul tells the believers - test it! Now, this letter does not go on to explain just how that was done and what criteria would be used to distinguish genuine from false prophecy, but

it was an unspoken expectation that church leaders would have the spiritual discernment to know.

This section is concluded with the general directive to hold on to what is good and abstain from all kinds of evil. Again, some of this would be easily known to the members of the church while others would have to be discerned by the leaders. This would be a guiding principle for all actions.

Let's take a moment here to address both a Level Two and a Level Three question before we conclude our study:

L2

What criteria would you think the early church (or modern day churches) would use to discern if the Holy Spirit was directing the church or if was being done by human effort alone?

L3

Think about your experiences at your current church (or one in the past). Have you ever been at odds about decisions being made by church leadership? Reflecting on those experiences, were your disagreements based on Scripture and discernment or on personal feeling and discomfort?

Let's wrap up this lesson by looking at Paul's concluding statements in verses 23-28. Again, this is the earliest of Paul's letters that we know about, and the manner in which he closes this letter will become a template for most of the ones yet to come. There is always some sort of blessing prayer for the people, a request for the people to pray for him and his companions, and the closing doxology for the grace of God to be poured out in the people.

In verse 23, Paul prays for God to sanctify the people. We have discussed at length the idea of sanctification in an earlier lesson. He prays that the process of sanctification will cause the people to appear blameless when Christ does return. That sanctification will include the entirety of the believer's existence - spirit, soul and body. It is not Paul's intent, at least in this passage, to create any great note of difference between the three aspects of human life. It is an expression that lends itself to the theology of *entire sanctification*, that a person's entire existence is important to God for sanctification.

Verse 24 is then a reminder that while God certainly expects the people to do their part for being obedient and faithful in their thoughts, words and actions, it is God who will perform this divine work of sanctification. By our own efforts we will always fall short. But it is God's perfection and His faithfulness to us that will make entire sanctification possible. We are the recipients of sanctification not the creators of it.

Paul concludes I Thessalonians by requesting that the people pray for him (verse 25), to greet each other on his behalf (verse 26) and to share this letter with everyone (verse 27). Finally, and something we will always find in Pauline letters, the grace of Christ is extended to all. It is in fact this grace, this unmerited, unearned love of God that is so central to the Christian life. Without grace we would have no hope, no faith, no chance for pleasing God. Thus, Paul concludes this letter.

What did Wesley say?

Regarding verse 16, Wesley had the following comment:

“Rejoice evermore - in uninterrupted happiness in God. Pray without ceasing - which is the fruit of always rejoicing in the Lord. In everything give thanks - which is the fruit of both the former. This is Christian perfection. Farther than this we cannot go; and we need not stop short of it. Our Lord has purchased joy, as well as righteousness, for us. It is the very design of the gospel that, being saved from guilt, we should be happy in the love of Christ. Prayer may be said to be the breath of our spiritual life. He that lives cannot possibly cease breathing. So much as we really enjoy the presence of God, so much prayer and praise do we offer up without ceasing; else our rejoicing is but a delusion. Thanksgiving, it is inseparable from true prayer; it is almost essentially connected with it. He that always prays is ever giving praise, whether in ease or pain, both for prosperity and for the greatest adversity. He blesses God for all things, looks on them as coming from Him, and receives them only for his sake; not choosing nor refusing, liking nor disliking, anything, but only as it is agreeable or disagreeable to his perfect will.

For Wesley, none of the discussion about the next life or the coming of Jesus can be more important than how we live our life now, for it is in our actions that our faith is displayed and it is in our faith that determines what will happen to us at the end of our lives.

LESSON SEVEN

READ 2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-12

Let's start with a bit of background information on what has happened between the writing of these two letters. To start it is important to remember that the placement of Paul's letters in the New Testament is *not* according to presumed chronological order but according to length and whether the letter was written to a church or an individual. Thus, the letters to churches are grouped together first and placed in order from the longest (Romans) to the shortest (2 Thessalonians). The so-called pastoral letters are grouped next, again from longest (1 Timothy) to the shortest (Philemon). With that being said, it is not necessarily true that 1 Thessalonians was written *before* 2 Thessalonians. Those titles were applied to the letters centuries after their writing and compilation into the New Testament. In fact, there has been a great deal of academic argument over the order of the two letters chronologically. However, most of the scholarship still does place 2 Thessalonians to be written less than a year after 1 Thessalonians. For our purposes we will take that as a given as it will have little if no implications for our study.

Paul is likely in Corinth at the time of the writing of 2 Thessalonians just as with 1 Thessalonians. The probable scene is that Timothy has returned from delivering Paul's first letter with good news about what he has found with the church. They are still strong, working through their faith in Jesus, and withstanding the persecutions coming from family, the community and the Roman Empire. Because little has changed for the people over such a short period of time, 2 Thessalonians covers much of the same ground as the first letter, primarily the return of Jesus. Paul is feeling a bit less apprehensive that Jesus' return is quite so imminent but still the expectation is that he will return within their lifetimes. Watch for more detail about the circumstances surrounding Jesus' return as "signs of the times" that the people should be able to recognize as preceding his arrival.

We can begin with verses 1-2 as the formulae for the opening of Paul's letters throughout his career. A greeting not only from Paul but also the friends who are with him, namely, Silas and Timothy. Next the naming of God the Father and Jesus the Christ followed by typical "grace and peace to you", again from the Father and the Son. This does not infer that Paul was unaware of the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity, but, as was said before, trinitarian theology will be created and re-created several times over the next five centuries. Paul was very well entrenched in the idea that the

Holy Spirit was the active force in the world at that time (and ours as well), but simply did not mention the Spirit in his salutations.

This provides a place for our first Level Three question:

L3

Thinking about your own spiritual focus, use of prayers, engagement in worship and in evangelism and missions, how would you divide the amount of time you spend directing your thoughts on the Father vs. the Son vs. the Holy Spirit? Just use rounded percentages.

Father -

Son -

Holy Spirit -

Let's move on to verses 3 and 4. In verse 3 it appears that Paul's previous concerns about the community (1 Thess. 1:3 and 3:10) particularly some who were idle and not putting their faith into action, are being corrected, as Paul describes their faith and love as growing more and more. In the Greek, Paul uses a superlative of his time, literally saying that their faith is "superabundant". Throughout his letters, Paul seems to take great joy in calling everything "super - something". It shows his great love for the people and his need to constantly encourage and compliment their life of faith.

Especially when faced with trials and persecutions, mentioned in verse 4, words of encouragement tend to strengthen people when their resolve might start to wither from the stress. That has been true for all of human existence and so it is natural to find it here and Paul seems to be a master at encouragement.

Which brings us to our next Level Three question:

L3

Encouragement works both ways, giving and receiving. Take a moment to reflect on a time when you have done both, and record just briefly here enough detail to remind you of two events:

1 - Think of a situation when someone brought you encouragement during a difficult time in your life:

2 - Think of a time when *you* were the one to bring encouraging words to someone who needed to hear them:

Paul presses his admiration for the church in Thessalonica further in verse four when he states that he and his companions *boast* about the actions of the church members. Boasting, in modern terminology, often is associated with outlandish, over-the-top claims which tend to prove not to be true. Psychologically, boasting is often a symptom of a deeper inadequacy in individuals. But here, in fact *only here* in the New Testament, Paul uses the word to speak about the confidence he has in the people to live out their faith in the world. So, how does one distinguish between the boasting which is a form of sinful self-pride and that displayed here which Paul uses as a compliment? Rudolph Bultmann, in a contribution to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says the following: *“Faith implies the surrender of all self-glorying. But for those who stand in faith there may open up a new possibility of boasting, namely, in terms of their achievements in the propagation of faith. For it is not they themselves who work in their labours, but the grace of God. Each can stand before God only as one who has received.”*

Moving on to verses 5-10, Paul takes the faithful actions of the people to segue into details about the coming of the Lord. Verses 5-6 speak about the actions of love and faithfulness as “tokens” or signs that the people are now *counted worthy* of the kingdom of God. Throughout Scripture we find that humans are incapable of being worthy of God, whether of God’s kingdom, God’s blessings, or God’s grace, etc. On our own merits we all fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). However, also throughout Scripture, God has found a way to *count* people as worthy, even when they were not. In the Old Testament this was often seen as God *crediting* someone as worthy or righteous, even when by all standards, they were not. Somehow God imbues worthiness upon the sinner as a gift of grace so that, in God’s eyes, that person is now what God has declared them to be, in this case, worthy of the kingdom of God. Again, not by human achievement but only by the pronouncement of the Almighty One.

Paul goes on in verse six to make a declarative statement that ties together an aspect of God’s character and the consequent action of God - *“...it is a righteous thing in God’s eyes to repay affliction to those who afflict you...”*. At first glance, that sounds like a retributive God rather than a God of justice or mercy. Let’s see how you handle this one in our Level Two question:

To help answer that question, we need to explore the biblical understanding of justice, mercy and grace. Justice is most commonly described as “the punishment fits the crime”, meaning there is an equality of effect between the harm done by a perpetrator and the restitution required by the one harmed, usually prescribed by a culture’s legal system. In the Old Testament this was exemplified by what is known as the *lex talliones*, better known as “an eye for an eye” (Exodus 21:23-25). This rule of

L2

How can God be both a God of justice and a God of mercy and grace. Don't these conflict with each other?

the Old Testament has been severely misunderstood and misapplied for centuries. It has become a Scriptural scapegoat used to justify revenge. In its biblical sense, however, it was not seen as some sort of permission giving rule to exact vengeance but rather, as a limiting law, to keep people from exacting more punishment than was deserved. For example, your neighbor's dog digs a hole under your fence, you do not have the right to burn down their home! You do have the right to demand the hole be fixed. Thus "eye for eye" requires the punishment to fit the crime and not to be exaggerated.

Justice, in this sense, is usually seen then in this negative understanding of punishment, and rightly so. But Justice also infers a positive sense in terms of reward given for good deeds. Someone acts in a way that is considered a common courtesy or politeness, justice requires little more than a word of gratitude in return. Finding and returning someone's lost pet might deem a monetary reward be a fitting response. But there are expected limits here too. Someone helps you put your groceries into their car and then demands that you pay for their child's college education would be a ridiculous expectation. The reward does not fit the service rendered.

Keeping those definitions and examples in mind, let us now return to justice, mercy and grace. Mercy is the attribute shown by God (and expected by us to repeat) whereby we have committed some sin that is due a particular punishment (justice) but instead, God provides us with a lesser punishment than we deserve. Say, for example, we steal an item from a store and are caught and convicted. The legal precedent is that the item must be returned and we spend 30 days in jail. But instead the judge sentences us to only 3 days in jail. That would be an example of mercy, as the punishment did not fit the crime and, in fact, it was much less harsh than the law required. In the same way, we sin against God, which requires a punishment, but, when we ask for forgiveness by the blood of Christ, we are forgiven. The eternal punishment of damnation has been commuted and our sentence erased. That is mercy.

In the same way, we properly act in a manner that deserves a word of encouragement and thanks and instead, God pours out His blessings upon us to a degree that is unearned and undeserved. That is the definition of grace. Keep following the logic here to see if you agree with me or not.

If biblical justice is defined by the *lex talliones*, as punishment or reward fitting the act of sin or faith, then receiving less punishment than we deserve (mercy) or more reward than we deserve (grace) are acts of *injustice*, because they do not fit the idea of equality of reaction.

Now let's return to the question of how God can be both a God of justice and a God of mercy and grace. The answer, is because God Himself chooses to be either just, merciful or gracious. In any case, we are never being treated worse than we deserve, thus justice becomes the worst case scenario while mercy and grace become blessings from God.

Do you agree with my logic? Does it make a difference with the answer you gave above in the Level Two question?

Let's keep going and see how verses 7-10 reflect the biblical ideas of justice, mercy and grace.

These verses seem to portray a time of divine justice for all those who do not know God as well as for those who directly disobey the Lord. In verse 8, the English word *vengeance* is used in many translations as a description of God's actions. An alternative translation is the word *judgment*, which probably fits better with the specific context of this passage given that it is couched in the language of the "day of

the Lord”, where final judgment for eternity (vs.9) is expected by God upon all human beings.

This section is one of the earliest to describe details about the coming of Jesus although a Jewish-Christian audience would have heard similar descriptions from Old Testament texts as well. The Lord comes with *his mighty angels* (vs.7) indicating that heaven itself is descending to earth in a way never seen before. This is a further symbol of the expectation that this is the advent of the final judgment to end the presence of evil forever. The Lord comes in *flaming fire* (vs.7) representing the purifying power of God. This is known as a *theophany*, a word which describes how God appears to human beings in a form that can be recognized. Old Testament texts are filled with such theophanies - fire, smoke, clouds, burning bush, strong winds and many more.

Verses 9-10 describe the results of the Lord’s coming - eternal destruction for those who have been disobedient and relief and glory for those who are faithful. There is an interesting detail given to us in verse 9 about what the eternal destruction will be - absence from the presence of God. Other images such as fire and brimstone a hellish place of pain and suffering exist as well, but throughout the scriptures we see images of distance from God as a form of punishment and close proximity to God as a form of reward. It is unlikely that a three-dimensional distance is in mind here, but a spiritual distancing, whatever that might look like. Images of heaven and hell have greatly varied over the centuries of scriptural interpretation. Many were greatly influenced during the Middle Ages, especially through art. These that remain with us today, as well as great literary works such as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Dante’s *Inferno*.

That brings us to the next question which is a mixture of Level Two and Level Three because it asks you to describe heaven and hell based on both your understanding of scripture and your imagination.

Heaven is:

Hell is:

This lesson concludes by examining verses 11-12. The reading audience of the previous verses may be filled with fear considering the images Paul has described for the unbelieving and unfaithful. So he closes this section with words of comfort, reminding the people that as long as they are striving for holiness, exemplified in their daily actions, they will not be counted among those headed to destruction, but instead, bound for sharing in the glory of Jesus. This is Paul's prayer for them. The concept of sharing in God's glory is not uncommon in Scripture but it is always understood as a gift of God's grace, not something given as payment due for achieving some level of moral perfection. It is another act of God's grace bestowed upon the believers because he loves them!

What did Wesley have to say?

As noted before, John Wesley had little to say about the return of Jesus, the rapture, the tribulation and such. He was much more focused on how the believer should live life now so that the end-times would not be frightening but an assurance of eternal salvation and glory. He did, however, have a comment on these verses and

the idea that a God of love could wreak such vengeance on people, whether they were believers or not. To that end, Wesley offered the following:

Everlasting destruction - As there can be no end to their sins (the same enmity against God continuing) so neither of their punishment; sin and its punishment running parallel throughout eternity itself. They must of necessity, therefore, be cut off from all good, and all possibility of it.

LESSON EIGHT

READ 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

As we move into Chapter Two you are going to hear phrases and words that will take you to images of what has become known as “the great tribulation”, or the years before Jesus returns to rid the world of evil and set up his permanent kingdom. Most of those images come from John’s Revelation, which was written decades after Paul’s letters. But here in Paul’s 2nd letter to the Thessalonians, we begin to encounter some of those concepts, terms and characters.

I think it is important to bring an academic word of background information before we enter into this discussion. The specifics of Christ’s second coming have been debated and examined in excruciating detail and I will not cover much of that, except to give you a short analysis of the four major ways that the return has been interpreted over the past two millenia. These four are not exhaustive but they probably represent 90% of the ideas proposed. This will be important to understand how Paul interprets what he thinks is about to happen and to help you come up with a better understanding of your own interpretation of the end times.

Four Interpretive Views

1: The Preterist View - This interpretation sees almost all of these events as they relate to the First Century. Even the prophetic events occurred and were fulfilled by the end of 100 AD. Only pieces of the end of Revelations, like the return of Jesus, have yet to have occurred. Characters like the “man of lawlessness” or anti-Christ were interpreted as political leaders like Nero of that day and time.

2: The Historicist View - This view has as its common theme the idea that most of the events have already happened, that a few critical events are happening in the lifetime of the reader and only the end of the story is yet to come, but in the very near future. Almost every generation of Christian history has authors who see events being played out in their own day and time.

3: The Futurist View - From this interpretive view only Chapters 1-3 of the Book of Revelations are events of the past (the intro and the letters to the seven churches) and everything else is yet to come, but even then only in the last few years before the coming of Jesus. This would include everything mentioned in Paul’s letter. Among this interpretation are varieties of argument about whether or not the events happen in chronological order or some simultaneously, but all will happen at the last days.

4: The Idealist View - This view does not see any of the events as historical happenings but rather portray the constant battle between good and evil in all time periods and cultures, with good eventually winning the day. The story of the return of Jesus is a metaphor for human life and God's intervention in human affairs. This is a very late interpretation and doubtful one of Paul's possibilities.

There are, of course, views that are a mixture of two of the views here, but again, these are the four that typically have risen to the top of the list over the centuries as to how to interpret the Scriptures about the return of Jesus. Where do you think Paul would land in this series of options?

Let's move on now into Chapter Two. The opening verses (1-2) seem to be Paul trying to calm down the fears of the people in Thessalonica about the tragedy and ferocity of these events by reminding them of what he had already taught them about Jesus' return, apparently when he was in their presence. The source of the fear appears to be alternative teaching from somewhere that these events had already occurred and the people missed them.

The first of these false teachings that is mentioned is from a "spirit inspired utterance". The idea of a "spiritual utterance" was well known to the Christian community because of the events of Pentecost, when the apostles were all filled with the Spirit and began to speak in tongues. But prophetic utterance was also well-known going back hundreds of years to the Jewish prophets. The gift of prophecy was yet to be described by Paul (that comes later as seen in 1 Cor. 12 and Romans 12) but it was already happening. The problem was that there were "fakes" as well. There were people claiming to have such power but they were frauds, using this supposedly holy gift only to enhance their own status or profit. Paul encourages the people to discern whether or not the utterance was true by comparing the message against the gospel that he had proclaimed to them.

In our current day, I have no doubt that such gifted prophets exist alongside of many frauds, proclaiming to speak in the name of the Lord. In all my congregations, people have asked, “*How are we to know the difference?*” Let’s use that as a Level Three question:

L3

How would you discern the difference between a true and a false prophet of God?

The second warning of Paul’s comes against “the spoken word”. This would be distinguished from the spiritual utterance simply by the lack of a non-ecstatic proclamation. In other words, the person delivering the message is assuming a level of authority that he did not possess and was trying to pass himself off as a Christian leader. This type of false proclamation would plague Paul throughout his ministry, as others, typically those trying to undermine Paul’s ministry, would follow him and attempt to lead the people in a different direction.

The third warning from Paul concerns the written word, purporting to be from Paul. We would call that forgery! Again, history has taught us that there were groups of people who tried any means possible to stop the rise of Christianity and Paul’s ministry in particular. Later in this letter, it is possible to see a hint of this at 3:17 where Paul draws attention to writing to the people “*...in my own hand...*”.

Paul next begins to spell out a series of events that must occur *before* Jesus returns. These events will let the people know that Jesus had not yet returned and that they needed to continue in their faithful waiting without the fear of having

missed him. The first of these events is a rebellion and the revealing of a “man of lawlessness”.

In verse 3, the word *apostasia* is used to describe this rebellion that is coming. This Greek root gives rise to our English word *apostacy*, describing a falling away or departure from what is considered a moral norm. This could describe numerous acts of civil or religious disobedience. But here the rebellion described in the following verse is noted as *the* rebellion, indicating that it will be greater than any seen before, so much so, that there will be no confusing it as anything other than a clear indication of the beginning of the end-times activities.

Corresponding with this rebellion is the appearance of a leader described as both “the man of lawlessness” and “the son of perdition”. The phrase “man of lawlessness” could have fit any number of Old Testament characters from Pharaoh to Nebuchadnezzar to the king in Daniel setting himself above all other kings and gods. Even in the reader’s time, Caesar could fit the bill or any number of local monarchs such as King Herod. But this one seems to have power over the entire world, rather than just a region or country. Remembering that none of the gospels have been written at the time of Paul’s letters, the stories and teachings of Jesus would be known. Perhaps people would have heard Jesus’ comments that his second coming would be preceded by “...the abomination of desolation standing where he should not...” (Mark 13:10).

The phrase “son of perdition” will refer to one who is destined for eternal destruction. The same word is used to describe Judas in John 17:12. So, his eternal future is already known, however, that does not deter him from wreaking havoc on humanity in order to try to take control and power. This character will also become associated with another term found in Revelations, that of the *anti-Christ* who will precede the arrival of Satan and his demons.

As you can imagine, or perhaps even read, throughout the history of the church, most generations have identified someone in their current time whom they believed was fulfilling this prophecy. John Wesley was not spared from this. It should be noted that as a man of faith, Wesley was one of the giants, to whom the Methodist Church and its affiliates all draw our specific theologies. However, he was no fan of the Roman Catholic Church and its popes. Here is an excerpt from his commentary on 2 Thess. 2:3:

What Wesley said:

“This (falling away) began even in the apostolic age. But the man of sin, the son of perdition - eminently so called, is not come yet. However, in many respects, the Pope has an indisputable claim to those titles. He is, in an emphatic

sense, the man of sin, as he increases all manner of sin above measure. And he is, too, properly styled, the son of perdition, as he has caused the death of numberless multitudes, both of the opposers and followers, destroyed innumerable souls, and will himself perish everlastingly.”

Whether Wesley was referring to the Pope of his day in particular or the papacy in general, we do not know. Either way, he saw the Pope playing that role. Since that time, Popes have often been the target of being called the anti-Christ as have any number of political leaders. The names simply change with the decade and the location.

Verse 4 continues to describe the actions which should further identify this person for the believer. He will oppose both civil and religious leaders, he will exalt himself in their place, and take his seat in the sanctuary of God. To the First Century audience hearing this, they may have immediately thought of the Emperor Gaius, better known in history as Caligula. In the year 40 AD, Caligula actually tried to set up a statue of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem. However he was assassinated before he could accomplish this. But a further question must be asked about whether Paul was referring to the physical seat of God in the holy of holies in the Temple, or speaking in general terms about setting himself up in a symbolic sense on God’s throne. The answer, we do not know.

Paul reminds his audience, in verse 5, that he has spoken to them about all this before, undoubtedly a reference to the time when he was physically with them. But verse 6 adds another level of mystery to the discussion. To state that the people in Thessalonica *know* what is currently restraining the anti-Christ from appearing, seems to be taken-for-granted. Is Paul speaking in specific terms or in symbolic ones? We do not know. All we can determine is that Paul believed this character would be revealed by these actions in time, according to God’s will. Until then, the “mystery of lawlessness” (vs.7) is already at work in their time and community. We can conclude, as we have shown earlier, that Paul believed the return of Jesus would happen at the very least, within his lifetime. Thus, action is already in the works which will bring about this prophecy. At some point in the not-too-distant future, Paul expects that whatever the restraining agent is, will soon be removed and the anti-Christ revealed to the world (vs.8).

But Paul does not allow that picture to be the last one in the minds of the Thessalonians. Verse 8 continues by reminding the people that Jesus will destroy this man of lawlessness, “*with the breath of his mouth*” inferring the ease with which he will be defeated. It is this battle that is combined with the appearance of Jesus. The word pictures of a battle scene are scattered throughout Scripture, both Old and New Testaments. Isaiah and Malachi describe such battle in connection with the great and

terrible Day of the Lord, and, of course, Revelations describes further details of the battle itself.

Verse 9 describes three visible characteristics of the anti-Christ. Your Level One Question is to name the three:

It is important to notice that these three characteristics are also true of Jesus

L1

What three characteristics of the anti-Christ are mentioned in verse 9?

1-

2-

3-

in that Christ was manifested with power, signs and wonders. No doubt this did/will throw believers into confusion as to whether or not the man of lawlessness is the anti-Christ or Christ himself. The difference will be found in verse 10, that while the actions may have parallel, those by the anti-Christ are filled with deceitfulness and unrighteousness.

A question that may have come up in the minds of the readers (and perhaps to ours as well) is what happens to those who follow the false Christ because they were fooled? Are they given a pass because they just didn't know enough to recognize the signs? What if they were "baby Christians" not yet fully versed in making such a distinction? Will there be a chance for them to repent and be forgiven and thus avoid the same fate and the anti-Christ?

Verses 10-11 begin to answer some of these questions, but leave little hope for those deceived. The question of *ignorance* of the truth, meaning truly having no information, is not really addressed here. What is addressed here are those who heard the truth and openly rejected it, as Paul says, "...*they did not receive the love of truth.*" Deceived or not, there seems to be no comfort given to those who should have known the truth and rejected it to follow the anti-Christ. Thus, they will not be saved.

But verse 11 adds something that turns the stomach of many Christians. Paul says that "...*God sends them a working of delusion...*". The word order and grammar in English properly reflects the Greek in that it appears that God Himself is the working agent behind their delusion. And it's not the first time we have encountered such a thought. Isaiah 29:10 speaks about how God will send the people a "...*spirit of deep sleep has been poured out upon you...*". Yet other places where God is said to have

“hardened the heart” of someone, like Pharaoh. That brings us to another mixture of Level Two and Level Three questions:

The typical academic answer to the above question goes something like this. First, these people are not innocent bystanders who God randomly chooses to keep from knowing truth. These people have already consciously given themselves over to believing a lie and made the choice to be disobedient. Second, God knows their hearts and minds and whether or not they are capable, even with signs and wonders, of repenting of this sin and becoming a believer. Third, it is not God who has created the lie which leads to their disbelief or lie, it is Satan and thus God is simply allowing the people to reap the consequences of their own actions. That is God’s active participation in this delusion. So the obvious Level Three question to follow is this:

L3

Does the academic explanation ease your consternation with the idea that God could purposefully deceive someone?

The result of believing in the lie is found in verse 12 - the people will be judged according to their acceptance of the lie of Satan rather than the truth of God. In this particular context judgment is associated with the *last judgment*, after which there will be a cleansing of the earth from evil in any form. Satan, his demons and his human followers are cast into hell for eternity, away from the presence of God. This theme is found in the Old Testament and greatly detailed in the New Testament especially in the gospels and in the Book of Revelations.

LESSON NINE

READ 2 THESSALONIANS 2:13 - 3:16

As we near the end of this letter, no doubt Paul's audience is exhausted, theologically and emotionally by all this talk of end-times, lies, destruction and condemnation. But Paul has also carefully carved out a place of safety and encouragement in the midst of all this horror for the believers. Paul will now conclude his second letter with words of encouragement, a few final instructions and his usual prayer for blessings from God to be upon them. Since this is our final lesson, hear Paul's words not just as the historical letter to a distant congregation, but hear them as Paul writing these words to you personally as well.

Paul begins this final piece of the letter by turning to the congregation in Thessalonica and bringing them words of encouragement. In verses 13-14, Paul reminds the people of how precious they are to Jesus.

In verse 13 Paul says that God *chose* them and in verse 14 says that God *called* them. These would not be unfamiliar phrases to the people whether from a Jewish background or a pagan one. That idea of choosing them as a people would bring to mind the choosing of the Hebrew people "out of the land of Ur", specifically referring to the choosing of Abraham's family to be the start of the lineage of the chosen people. Now Paul uses that same language to describe how they had been chosen, not just as a congregation but as individuals, to follow Jesus, to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit and to become a new people. This statement should bring them a sense of courage and a reminder of how much God loves them.

He follows that with the idea of "being called" by God. It might be an oversimplification, but I think of the analogy of a parent calling out their child's name with the expectation that the child will come running to find out what the parent wants. God initiates the encounter but the people have the free will to respond or not. Paul commends them for the fact that when they heard God's call, through the gospel, that they indeed did respond with obedience and joy.

Let's stop there for a Level Three question. Some of you reading this workbook have been Christians your entire life. You have never strayed but have always remained faithful. Others of you were raised in a Christian household but as an adult walked away from the faith to pursue your own will. But then you came back to the Lord and have restarted a relationship with Him. Still others of you may have never

had a childhood experience of faith and are coming to believe as a adult for the first time. Regardless of the specific context of your experience, all of you have been chosen and called by God into a relationship with Jesus Christ and you are now in the process of developing and maturing that relationship.

There are two parts to this Level Three question. Part One does not require you to write down anything, but rather to ponder this question:

Think about when you first became aware that God was calling and choosing you to a life with Him. It may have been a singular moment or it may have been a series of accumulating experiences. I would like you to put down this workbook for the rest of today and just think back on how/when/where God has both chosen you and called you. When you feel you are done, then return to this lesson for Part Two.

L3

God calls us for salvation by sanctification, meaning the ongoing process of being made more into the image of Christ. Describe what sort of progress you have made since becoming aware of your calling.

Further in verse 14, Paul says that part of our calling is in order that we might “...obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here is a Level Two question for you answer:

L2

If glory is something that is reserved for God alone, then how do Christians “obtain” it?

The word used here for “obtaining” glory is the same as was used in 1 Thess. 5:9. The English word “obtaining” is probably not the best translation, nor were any of the others I found. The idea of obtaining is very much in a passive sense of God receiving the glory of those who become believers and He then, in return, shares that glory with us, as if inviting us into a spotlight while we are standing just outside its glow. It is not by our own merits that we deserve the glory or even a share of it, but rather, through the grace of God that He makes the spotlight larger so as to include us. This language, in this context, is specific to the glory God will receive and share at the second coming of Jesus. In a greater context, as found in other passages, the sharing of God’s glory fits the same theme of His act of grace not our acts of deserving that glory.

Paul moves into verse 15 with the Greek equivalent of “...so then...” which has the similar effect of “...therefore...” which we have discussed earlier. The truth of the statements of verses 12-14 are what enable the truth of the actions in verse 15. Paul mentions holding on to the “traditions” or “teachings” they had received earlier, whether they had received them by the spoken word (whereby we assume Paul’s teachings and Timothy’s affirmation of those) or by written word (perhaps a previous letter(s)). But the idea of “traditions” would reach much further than that. Traditions may have very easily included teachings and practices of the Jewish faith as well. Not everything was thrown out wholesale about the faith handed down through the ages just because of the addition of faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Traditions such as meditation on Scripture, worship, prayers and various religious rituals would still have significant places in the life of a new Christian community as well, even if the theology had to be adapted. I think this holds true today as well. It certainly did in Wesley’s mind. As noted earlier, Wesley held Scripture above all else in terms of the basis for Christian faith, but not exclusively. He gave

secondary weight to experience, reason and...tradition. For tradition, Wesley would refer to the teachings and practices of the Christian Church through the ages which had been handed down and were considered authentic and holy. They had “proven themselves” if you will, by standing the test of time. That brings us to the next Level Three question:

L3

List the “traditions” of the church that have been especially impactful to your faith journey.

Turning next to verse 16, Paul is starting to wrap up the letter with a sentence that almost has the form of a *doxology*. *Doxology* is a term that literally means “glory words”. In our traditional worship services there is actually a song called the doxology, usually played as the offering is brought forward to the altar table. You will recognize its familiar words:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise Him all creatures here below.

Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts.

Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

(I'll bet you sang it as you were reading it!) It is a prayer basically to God both praising Him for blessings (in this case God's love, encouragement and hope) and asking for more of the same for the believer (encourage your hearts and establish you in every good work and word). The word for encouragement appears twice in this passage. The Greek word can be translated in various ways such as; "to call to", "to beseech", "to encourage" and "to comfort". The proper translation must then depend on context. Here the translation of encouragement is closely paralleled with the idea of exhortation, that is, words which help to build up someone when they are growing tired and exhausted spiritually. Paul's further idea of "eternal encouragement" can mean that such encouragement will continue beyond this life or could mean encouragement about eternal life. Either way, the people of Thessalonica would receive these words to help them stay strong when much of the oppression they were experiencing could sap them of their spiritual energy.

In verses 1-5 of Chapter 3, Paul turns to the needs of himself and Timothy and others who were helping them spread the gospel. Verses 1-2 speak to the need for prayer, not so much for the individuals but for what? That is your next Level One question.

L1

What specifically is Paul asking the people of Thessalonica to pray about in Chapter 3:1-2?

Paul certainly wants the people to pray for himself and the other missionaries but of greater importance is pray for the effectiveness of the gospel itself, just as

they had seen demonstrated in Thessalonica. As flawed human beings, Paul knew that he and the others would come and go, but the gospel had to remain and to continue to flourish. This was the desire of the prayers they requested.

Regardless of their own faults or the attacks on them by others, Paul reminds the people in verses 3-4 that God is faithful, in other words, never having fault of any kind, never being able to be deterred or stopped by any human force. It is this character of God that Paul relies upon to uphold the people as they face adversity. There is obvious evidence that it has already taken place and is continuing to do so. Paul simply prays that such an act of God will continue. The key unmentioned aspect for the Thessalonians is that God will continue to do this *so long* as the people remain faithful in the face of that persecution.

The final piece of this doxology (verse 5) is that the Lord will continue to pour His love into their hearts and that they would manifest the steadfastness they had known about Christ's life. There is an expectation that the obedient acts of the Christian life would bring greater blessings on the people but also *through* the people to others. They would be working hand-in-hand (better Spirit-in-spirit) with God to expand the kingdom by reaching others, which in turn, brought greater glory to God.

The next ten verses (6-16) are Paul's "final charge" you might say, to inspire the people to continue on in their faith regardless of opposition, whether from without or from within by people who were not pulling their own weight. This seems to be the greatest threat to the life of the faith community. Some individuals, apparently enough to need attention from this letter, have decided not to participate fully in caring for one another, but instead, to expect others to take care of them with little in return on their part. This is not directed at those who *cannot* work but to those who *will not* work like the others (vs.10) and carry their fair share of the burden. This laziness seems to create an additional layer of sin in that such free time has been created in their schedules, that they can engage in criticizing others (vs.11).

Paul reminds the community that he and the others, when they were first in the community, set an example for them so as to not become a "burden" on the people (vs.7-8). Paul even suggests, rather off-handedly, that the missionaries actually could have expected the people to take care of their needs in exchange for the value of the gospel they were proclaiming (vs.9). But, once again, the balance between expectations for themselves vs. undue burden on the people, tipped the scales in the behalf of the community.

The particulars of the context were underscored by the principle that the benefit for others must outweigh the benefit to self. This is the faith-lesson to be taught by the missionaries and then exemplified by the Thessalonians.

For the most part, the people were doing a fine job of this, caring for one another's needs. But there had to be a significant enough number of others who were taking advantage of this for it to be mentioned toward the end of Paul's letter. The question remains - what do we do about these lazy people?

Paul's answer may seem a bit off-putting at first. Verse 6 suggest that those who are conducting themselves in a faithful manner keep distance from those who are not! This sounds like the Amish practice of *shunning* in which a member of the community leaves (for a multitude of reasons) and then is considered an outsider to the group, even if they are blood-related. If the person who has left returns within a short period of time, there is a practice by which they can be reinstated. But if the distance lasts too long, the shunning can become permanent. The Greek word here is commonly translated simply as avoidance and probably does not have rituals associated yet with exclusion or reintegration into the community. This is only to be practiced on those who have shown deliberate opposition to the accepted rules of life for the Christian community.

Apparently if the disobedience (disorderly action in many translations) continues, then a second level of reprisal is in order. Verse 10 states that if such an able-bodied person still refuses to work, then they are forbidden to eat! It is unlikely that the instruction means to go to that person's home and steal their food stores so that their pantry is completely empty. The idea of forbidding food more likely is associated with the "love feast" that became part of most Christian communities. In practice, what happened was that the people met together for worship on Sundays, beginning early in the morning. The hours that followed would have been filled with teaching, exhorting, praying for one another and giving glory to God. The formal part of the morning worship was then followed by what we today might refer to as a pot-luck supper! People from the community would bring what they could and share with other believers. Those who had little brought little. Those who had abundance brought plenty to share. It was in this setting that the practice of today's Communion service found root, before it became so highly ritualized. It was exclusion from this practice that is probably what was in mind with the strong exclusionary language of verse 10. The hope was that exclusion, not just from a single meal, but from this time of fellowship and caring would bring the lazy person to repent of their actions (or lack of them) to the community. It then became the requisite action of the community to embrace them and accept them back into the life of the church. Thus, the action of shunning was not so much punishment as it was enticing to see what they were missing and create a desire to be fully engaged once again.

But there is the somewhat unspoken but very real expectation that their behavior would change and not revert to the previous life of laziness and meddling in

the lives of others. Continued disruptive behavior is not addressed here in detail as is it in other later Pauline letters. Verses 14-16 convey the expectations on the community toward the person being shunned not to add further persecution to that person's life but to do so keeping in mind that the person is still considered a "brother". In this way, the family relationship is not completely broken, although the benefits of family membership are not fully enjoyed.

That sounds great in theory, but what about in practice? Here is your next Level Two question:

L2

How do you imagine this practice of shunning would work effectively to bring the person to repentance rather than making them more resentful of the community and creating a greater gulf between them?

Wesley's comment on this section includes the comment that to admonish a brother means to "...*tell him lovingly of the reason why you shun him.*" In his letters and diaries, Wesley refers to a few examples where such shunning was recommended. As we might have guessed, it had mixed results. Some of those shunned turned back to the community with repentance and were received with great joy. Others decided that leaving the community to join another or to simply remain afar was their choice.

Paul concludes his second letter in what will become typical Pauline style. He prays for peace to be extended to the people, from the Lord as he is present with them at all times.

Some Final Questions

I so much appreciate your taking part in this study, especially in this new format. I would appreciate your critique of the course by asking you to answer a few questions and giving you space for undirected comments. Afterwards please upload your answers to my email so I can make appropriate edits on the next edition of the study. Thank you all so very much and may God bless you mightily for your dedication and faithfulness!

Question 1 - What surprised you the most about this study of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians?

Question 2 - What part of your faith was strengthened or reaffirmed from this study?

Question 3 - What did you like best about the format of this study?

Question 4 - In what way(s) could the study be improved?

Question 5 - Please use this space to make additional comments not covered by the previous question.

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