

# **1 Thessalonians**

A Commentary

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## 1 THESSALONIANS

### Chapter 1

1. It is our custom to begin our letters with the word 'Dear', followed by the name or title. In the same way, Paul opens his letters in the customary format of his time. Sensibly, the name of the sender comes first (we have to turn to the end to discover the author). As well as himself, Paul refers to Silas (the Greek has the full name, Silvanus) and Timothy. Silas often accompanied Paul on his journeys and was imprisoned with him in Philippi. The fact that he was a Roman citizen would have been an asset in travelling around the empire and his association with the church in Jerusalem may have helped authenticate Paul in the eyes of Christians. Timothy was the child of a mixed marriage, his father was a Greek, but his mother a Jew who taught him the Scriptures. Paul referred to him as his son in the faith of Christ and he accompanied the apostle on many of his journeys. They were very close and we have two letters which Paul wrote to him.

The letter is apparently addressed specifically to the church of the Thessalonians rather than to the believers in a wider area – as is the case with regard to other letters attributed to Paul. He speaks of them being in both the Father and Christ. Perhaps we should not read too much into an opening greeting, but even today believers in their thinking can concentrate almost exclusively on one member of the Godhead, usually Jesus the Son. We need to remember and live in the fact that Jesus came to bring us to the Father who, in the consummation of all things, will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28), but that without Jesus we could not know the Father.

The words 'Grace and peace' are more than a formal greeting. The grace of God is all that God is as man is capable of receiving him. Grace is to God what sunshine is to the sun; it is the self-sacrificing love of God experienced by humankind. Peace is not simply the absence of anything that would cause problems or stress; it is the positive bringing about of total wellbeing and involves wholeness and fulfilment; in body, soul and spirit.

2. The Thessalonian Christians were, of course, converted under Paul's preaching and ministry and he rejoiced over them as a father over his children. So these are not idle words. He cared for them and therefore they were in his prayers.

3. Paul refers to faith, love and hope. We are saved by faith in Jesus; we cannot earn our salvation by anything (work) we can do. However, unless our faith results in a radical change in our understanding and approach to life, which, in turn, profoundly affects what we do, it is doubtful if our faith is real. The lives of these Thessalonian Christians reflect their faith.

Love, agape love, does not depend on some attribute in the person receiving it drawing it out of the lover, which is the case with normal, human love; but rather it springs totally from the nature of the lover. Thus the recipient may be unworthy and unlovely, even an enemy. Love gives of itself because that is what love is. Thus Scripture proclaims not that God has love, but that he is love (1 Jn. 4:8, 16). It may well be that the recipient does not appreciate the exercise of this love, but that does not deter the lover. Agape love goes on and on; in that sense it is a labour or toil.

Hope in its Christian sense, has no uncertainty about it. It is as much a fact of the future as history is a fact of the past. It may be described as history that has yet to happen. We set our hope on the promises of Christ, not in the sense that whilst they may or may not

be fulfilled we desire that that they will be, but rather that they are totally reliable. It is the certainty that there is the kingdom of God and that we have an eternal place in it which enables us to persevere and endure, whatever this life throws at us.

4. Paul has a warm affection for the Thessalonians. He had spent only a short time in the city because the Jews stirred up so much trouble. However, as Paul says in v.2, the faith of the believers stood firm and encouraged him greatly. But more important than his love for them is the fact that God loved them and had chosen them. This raises the great problem of election. How can it be fair for God to judge people if he has already chosen some and not others? It is no solution to say that he chooses those who have already proved their worth - for that would be to justify us according to our works; or even that he chooses those who choose him, because that simply reverses the situation; we elect him. No, Paul is thinking here of predestination. As he wrote to the the Ephesians, He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. [Eph 1:4/5] This is a matter which has exercised the keenest minds of devout men and women down the ages. On the one hand we all have free will, and every believer knows that at some time, whether or not he or she can point to a specific moment, they made a positive response to the invitation of Christ to follow him. On the other hand there is the clear statement of Jesus to the disciples who had made the decision to leave all to follow him, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit". [John 15:16] In the eternal economy these apparently mutually exclusive tenets must be perfectly reconciled, but we have to live our lives on earth holding them in tension

5. The evidence that God had chosen these Thessalonian believers was, Paul states, the fact that they accepted the truth of the gospel when it was preached to them. He refers to it as 'our' gospel, probably because it is not something apart from himself, he had appropriated it to such an extent that it was part of him. It is not a system of doctrines to be taught it is a way of living life and it has power to transform that life. That power is itself personal, it is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who filled the human Jesus, dwelling in believers. There are some things which cannot be proved in a scientific manner; they can only be known and experienced. The believer 'knows with his knower' (John Wimber) that what he knows is true.

The reference to how Paul conducted himself while he was in Thessalonica seems, at first, to be a sudden change of theme. Probably what was in his mind was that his and his companions own appropriation of the Gospel affected how they lived and it was this which...

6. ...had such an effect on these who has watched them that they became believers and then began to live in the same way. Christianity, at its roots, has never been a system of belief, important as doctrine may be, but of following a person, Jesus Christ. In today's world, with instant news and frequent travel, the different faiths compete on a global basis much more than in the past when nations and their cultures were more isolated from each other. With all the different claims, more and more will each tree be judged by its fruit. The NIV translation correctly uses the term 'imitators' rather than followers. While we are growing in our understanding of our Lord, we need to imitate his behaviour and that of his longer term followers. As we mature, so we understand better what we do.

The opposition of the majority of the Jews to the Christian message had been particularly vicious. They attacked those who had become believers (Acts 17:6) and Paul had had to flee by night to Berea (Acts 17:10). The Jews had pursued him even there. It was, therefore costly for anyone to profess faith in Christ. Nevertheless, these to whom

Paul is writing had taken that step and experienced a joy which was beyond any natural emotion; it was the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

7. Having caught the faith from Paul and his companions, these Thessalonian believers had become, in turn, models of faith to others. The word behind 'model' denoted a stripe or welt made on the skin by a blow or lash. The imprint of Christ lay upon these believers. It is interesting that Paul refers to their witness not to unbelievers but to believers. The faithful need their heroes to challenge them.

8. Because of these believers the message of the Lord burst forth like a clap of thunder. The word behind 'rang out' is used of a trumpet blast and is that from which we get our word 'echo'. The tense of the word does, in fact, imply that the sound, once made, hangs in the air. It would not be exaggeration to say that Paul claims that their lives echo that of their Lord. It would be wrong to take his description 'everywhere' too literally, but certainly their witness reached beyond the borders of Greece. How warmly Paul praises and encourages them.

9. Paul travelled widely and so it is indeed remarkable that news of the Thessalonian Church was apparently going ahead of him. People were telling him what was happening there and, without him raising the subject, told him of how well he had been received in Thessalonica (admittedly only by those who responded to his message).

He summarises the Christian convert in a form of shorthand. First they turned from idols. At that time, and until comparatively recently, almost everyone believed in some sort of god, and many religions had idols, material representations of them. It was, therefore, a very real evidence of a new faith when a person turned from their idols; spiritually it was a brave and major step to reject those powers which, until then, you believed were controlling your destiny. Today, many people believe that science has shown that there is no need for an ultimate source of creation. For some, gods have become dispensable while others have different idols which have no physical manifestation. And some who do believe, do not turn from these 'idols' but bring them with them so that there is no distinctive witness.

Secondly having turned from idols they turned to serving God. The Christian life is a verb not a noun; active service not static doctrinal correctness. The word translated 'serve' is *doouleuo*, akin to *doulos*, a bond-slave. No doubt Paul intended the word 'living' to contrast with the 'dead' idols, but it has an added significance today when there is the 'God is dead' school of thought. God not only created the world, he upholds it by the continual expression of himself (Hebrews 1:3). The best definition of the words truth and true as used in Scripture is to say that they speak of reality – that which is.

10. The third consequence of conversion which Paul mentions is the expectation of the second coming, the return of our Lord Jesus Christ to earth. There is little doubt that in the early church there was a greater expectancy than we see today. That is natural enough. The message of the angels at the ascension of Jesus that he would return in the same way that the disciples had seen him go (Acts 1:11) was clear, and so it would be expected. The passing of a second millennium since that promise, has dulled our sense of its likelihood during our own life time – on the law of averages, most of us think it more likely that we shall meet Jesus by dying and going to be with him (Philp.1:23) than that we shall be the ones alive at the time when he comes to meet believers in the air (1 Thes. 4:17). However, two things must be said. First, if the expectation that Jesus might

return at any moment kept these early believers on their toes to be ready to meet with him, it is a fact that none of us knows when will die; it could be very sudden. We need to be as ready as they to meet our Lord at any moment, whether he comes for us or we go to him. Secondly, the fact that he will return means the end of the present world order. As we read in the second letter of Peter, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives.”[2 Pet 3:9/11]

We must, therefore, do all we can to give others the opportunity to enter the kingdom while there is still time.

In speaking of Jesus, Paul cannot but refer to the resurrection. There are two general and opposing beliefs abroad: first, that everyone continues after this life; but that belief is vague. There is no guarantee that it is possible to survive death – the resurrection is not only evidence that death has been defeated, but because it is God himself who is responsible for it, life is going somewhere, it has a purpose and that purpose is found in him. The other belief is that life itself is a purely chance happening, there is no creator and at death we all go out like a candle. Morality and righteousness may be useful to make life easier while we are here, but they have no eternal value; ultimately it doesn't really matter how we live, we will not be called to account. But we will, there is a wrath to come. God hates sin. We have made a terrible mess of this world; he cannot possibly allow eternity to be contaminated in this way. So, underlying these words is the truth that there is a judgement on all that does not conform to God's will but, also, God has provided a way to enter his eternity for all who truly desire it.

## Chapter 2

1. There was, of course, great opposition to the spread of the Christian faith and much of this came from the Jews. Paul was the great evangelist and missionary and so it is not surprising that he was the object of attack. Sometimes the attack was physical but what seem to have hurt him more than the physical pain were the slanderous attacks on his integrity and his motives. He now defends himself against these accusations.

Apparently his opponents were trying to play down the effectiveness of his time in Thessalonica. Here he refutes that; his visit to them had not been a failure, and it was continuing to bear fruit.

2. In Philippi, Paul and Silas had been flogged and then put in the stocks in prison. They had been insulted, ‘shamefully entreated’ (A.V.). Here Paul is referring to the underlying attitude which caused the Philippian authorities to inflict punishment. It is related to the warning of Jesus that those who say to another, “you fool!” will be in danger of hell fire (Matt. 5:22). It is to treat others and their views as not worthy of any consideration – something which it is all too easy for each of us to do. When the Philippians learned that Paul was a Roman citizen, their attitude changed immediately, but Paul was the same person both before and after they had this information.

Although, when they reached Thessalonica, the experience at Philippi was fresh in their minds (and probably on their backs) they found a freedom to share the gospel. It was double freedom; freedom from fear and freedom of speech, eloquence, even though they encountered severe opposition. Paul knew that this was more than any personal

courage they could summon; it was supernatural help from the God whose gospel it is. We have to take this gospel into ourselves and so it becomes 'our' gospel (1:5), but it originates in God himself. Ours is not, primarily, a discovered faith (although we discover more and more truth as we journey), it is a revealed faith – God has made known to us his plan for our salvation.

3. It seems that part of the opposition which Paul encountered - or which he is now encountering – is the slanderous accusation that he preaches the gospel for personal gain, whether that be financial or some power-seeking ego trip. He protests that the appeal or exhortation he made was not one of deceit. The word behind 'deceit' is *plane*, which carries the idea of wandering, hence 'error'. However, it may well be that Paul had been accused not so much of leading his listeners into error, as that he himself was preaching from delusion. Another accusation, apparently, was that his motives were impure (*akartharsia*); although this may refer to the gospel he preached being one of gross sensuality. Certainly some faiths advocated religious prostitution. It is also true that some critics accused Christians of advocating cannibalism because they claimed they were eating the Lord's body and drinking his blood in Communion; although there is no indication that this was the case at Thessalonica. Thirdly, Paul says that he was not trying to deceive or trick people by his preaching. The word *dolos* relates to bait when fishing. Although Jesus told Peter that in future he would catch men (Luke 5:10), this arose out of the circumstances of the moment. (I was employed as an insurance clerk and when I left the office to be ordained, someone quipped that I was exchanging one form of fire insurance for another). We do not preach the gospel in order to fill the church nor to gain more financial support; that would be a deceitful motive. We preach that individuals may not perish but have eternal life.

4. Before we allow someone to practise law or medicine, he or she has to pass certain tests. Paul is thinking along similar lines when he says he has been approved by God as fit to be trusted with the gospel. Thus the gospel is something which is precious and which exists in its own right. Certainly it needs to be made incarnate in human life for it is not simply a theory or doctrine; it has to be experienced and, when it is, then those who experience it can claim it is 'our' gospel (1:5). But the gospel itself is always more important than the one who is entrusted with it. Paul's explanation here shows that he is under the gospel, the gospel is not under him.

It may be that the word 'please' carries a sense of service also, but this does not really affect the meaning here. This raises a point which can prove difficult in practice. There should be no doubt that while each generation of preachers must interpret the eternal truths of God to be relevant in their own times, the latest fashion in morals does not change God's standards. Nevertheless, there are some changes in areas of life and culture which may reveal that certain facts of Scripture are open to alternative interpretation. For instance, the emancipation of women, which, surely, most enlightened nations would regard as good and necessary, has caused the church to question its attitude to the role of women in leadership. Some would see this as 'pleasing men' – seeking to gain acceptance in the current climate of feminism. Others believe that it has caused the church to study more closely what Scripture really says about the equality of men and women and their roles. However, that then becomes a matter of serious debate and differs from an individual seeking to win the favour of his hearers (or his sponsors) by toning down what he believes in his heart are the truths of God.

The reference to ‘testing’ the heart involves the same verb as ‘approved’ earlier in this verse. God knows the true motivation behind all our actions.

5/6a. In speaking of flattery Paul has in mind the attempt to manipulate others by the words and phrasing that we use. He goes on to speak of a cloak of covetousness. Some translations confine this to money. Undoubtedly that is included but for some preachers the temptation may be to gain fame, adulation or power. Paul protests that he and his fellows were not using their preaching for this purpose. We may be able to fool some people but we cannot fool God; he knows the secrets of our hearts.

6b/7. The word burden is literally ‘a weight’, and the Revised English Bible translates, “we might have made our weight felt”. Most translations and commentators take it to mean a financial burden. Certainly, in view of the comments Paul now goes on to make, that aspect is involved.

Paul has a very high doctrine of leadership in the church. He states that he has been appointed by Christ to be his apostle, one who has been sent, an emissary; he comes in the name of Christ. Christian leadership is a difficult path to walk. The leader needs to have the confidence which is given by the knowledge of having been called and commissioned by Christ. In seeking to overthrow Satan and the powers of darkness, this confidence is essential. However, he or she must avoid all impression of arrogance and self importance.

Paul reminds his readers that he was gentle among them. The Greek word behind ‘gentle’ is similar (one extra letter) to that for ‘babes’, and scholars believe, from the manuscript evidence, that the latter has a stronger claim. However, that does not make so much sense. In context, it was the Thessalonians who were the babes, not Paul and his group. Whatever the truth, the meaning is clear; Paul treated them with tenderness and care. Strictly speaking, the Greek word trophos means nurse. However, by linking this to ‘her own children’, it seems that Paul is thinking of a nursing mother.

8. What Paul explains here is a miniature reflection of the incarnation – God so loved the world that he gave himself in the person of his Son. Previously, he had shared his truth in giving his people the law by which they should live, but now he gave himself. So often in hearing of the work of the most successful missionaries we learn how much they were loved by their converts; “he (she) became one of us”. It isn’t enough to preach the gospel; we need to love those with whom we share it. We are to give not only the truth but ourselves. There is a school of thought which encourages pastors to be dispassionate, to withdraw their own personalities, in their presentation of the Gospel. This is in the belief that the Gospel has in itself all that is needed to draw men and women to the Lord, and the personality of the preacher may somehow contaminate the pure truth of the words. This may be so if the pastor is arrogant or self seeking but, provided the preacher is always subservient to the Gospel he or she proclaims, the effect it has obviously had on him or her plays a very real part in commending it to others.

9. Having said that, it is important that what the preacher preaches is the message he has received, the Gospel of God, unadulterated by any personal theories of his or her own. This is brought out by the use of the word behind ‘preached’; it means to proclaim, rather like a town-crier or herald speaking out a message.

Paul reminds his readers (most of whom would, in fact, be listeners, as the letter was read out to them) that he and his companions worked very hard to support themselves,

so that they would be no burden to the Thessalonians. The words he uses imply toil and fatigue. From Acts 18:3 we learn that Paul was a tent maker. Christians have different opinions as to whether workers should support themselves or should be paid (or at least 'kept') by those they serve. Surely it depends on circumstances and culture. Obviously missionaries taking the Gospel to unevangelised areas cannot and should not expect support from those with whom they share their message. But it seems reasonable that they should be supported by those who send them. Also, in the Western world, where there are established churches, demands are made which require a number of people to devote so much time to running the organisations (who is available to take several funerals a week?) that they have no opportunity to earn their own living, and it is right that the majority support the few who do this work on their behalf. But in small fellowships which do not have the resources to support a full-time pastor, it may be necessary for the pastor to have at least part-time secular employment.

10. The attacks on the motives of Paul and his group were being made, apparently, to denigrate them in the eyes of the Thessalonian converts. So Paul appeals to the believers' own memory of how they had behaved. By invoking the witness of God, he reveals that his own conscience is clear. The word 'holy' here signifies not so much piety as true dealing; 'righteous' is in the sense of carrying out a duty, and 'blameless' in that no accusation could stand. Of course, to any Christian pastor there is a great difference between those who belong to his flock (for whom, therefore, he has a particular responsibility) and those who do not; but because of the strong opposition he encountered, those who became believers were especially precious to Paul.

11/12. Having referred to caring for them as a mother cares for her children (7), Paul now likens himself to a father. If the former is associated particularly with gentleness and tenderness, the latter involves more masculine attributes. Paul says that he encouraged them in the sense of urging them on. He comforted them. The Greek word is a combination of two others meaning 'to speak near' – a word in their ear; that is, to console. The word behind 'urging' is literally 'to testify'. The NRSV has 'pleading', The JB 'appealing'; while Phillips covers all three with 'stimulating your faith and courage and giving instruction'. Paul says he did all this on a one to one basis.

His purpose was to ensure that their manner of life was worthy of the high calling of God which is a continual, moment by moment call; and it is to live in his kingdom. The kingdom of God is not so much a place as a way of life. Although there is a sense in which it is a realm in which we live where Jesus is king; it is also true that the kingdom is not lived in as much as lived out. For this reason the kingdom of God is not a realm we will enter when this life is over, but a way of living life eternally; and eternity embraces both the now and the future. We can experience both the kingdom and the glory of God now, but, we believe it will be enhanced in the life to come.

13. Paul began his letter (after the formal introduction of v.1) by saying that he thanked God for the Thessalonians, referring to their work and endurance. Now he specifies another reason for his thanksgiving to God; the fact that they received his teaching as being God-given – the word of God.

The AV repeats the word 'received' where NIV has 'received' and 'accepted'. NIV correctly reflects the fact that the Greek has two different words. The first, *paralambano*, conveys the fact that the Thessalonians heard what Paul was saying and understood it with their minds; the second, *dechomai*, that it affected them, it quickened and warmed them, they welcomed it. A word is an expression of the person who utters it and so the Bible, with the Gospel contained in it, is God expressing himself.

At creation, when God spoke out his intention, that intention became fact, the thing happened; God 'said' and what he said came into being. The writer to the Hebrews summed it up when he said, for the word of God is living and active. [Heb 4:12]

Having said that, it must be understood that the operation of the Holy Spirit is involved in the word becoming active. Just as "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit", so the word of God is brought to life by the Holy Spirit. The three persons of the Trinity work in harmony in creation and in redemption. For the person brought alive by the Holy Spirit, the word of God does indeed work within them.

14. It seems that the particular work of the word of God which Paul has in mind is that the Thessalonians remained strong in faith in spite of being persecuted. The AV has 'followers' where NIV has 'imitators'; the REB happily translates 'followed the example'. Jesus had warned the disciples that they would be persecuted as he had been and, of course, Paul, before his conversion, was one of those who had led the persecution against the church.

15/16. It is a sad fact that those who are most zealous in seeking to serve God can be the very ones who are most opposed to his will and who do the greatest damage to his plans. The Jews, the chosen people of God, had attacked their own prophets down the years and now they had actually committed the greatest sin of all, they had killed their Lord and Master, Jesus, both God and perfect man. Paul and his band had also suffered at their hands. Of course, this is contrary to the will of God who, through Jesus, sent believers into all the world to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). So not only do they displease God, they are preventing men and women from entering the kingdom and, as a consequence, they are hostile to everyone. The word behind hostile is used elsewhere of an opposing wind. The term 'saved' embraces the whole purpose of God for humankind. It is to be delivered from destruction, loss, pain and loneliness and obtain a new quality of life for eternity with all the blessings which union with God must involve.

Paul says that by opposing God in this way they are filling their sins to the brim and so God's wrath is upon them. There is a difficulty here in the tense. Strictly the meaning is that the wrath has already come, but in fact the effect of that wrath is not obvious. Another difficulty is whether the word *telos* should be translated as 'fully' or 'at last'. The REB has, "But now retribution has overtaken them for good and all!" It is probably best to take it as meaning that because of their sinful behaviour in opposing God the die has been cast, judgement has been passed in eternity but it has not yet been carried out in our time.

17. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the strength of language that Paul uses here to express his desire and that of his fellow evangelists) to see these Thessalonian converts again. The first word he uses, *aporphaniz*, actually contains our word 'orphan'. It is the word used for bereavement; such is his feeling towards them. Although it is a very real physical separation, he assures them that they are never out of his heart. He explains that he has done his utmost to see them (the word implies diligent effort), and enhances all this with a further word – 'abundantly'.

18. He continues along the same theme, explaining that of his team he in particular had tried several times to come to them but Satan had prevented it. He gives no details of what form Satan's activity took; perhaps it was already known to the Thessalonians and so he did not need to elaborate. It is interesting that he was so sure that it was the work

of Satan and not the Lord. In Acts 16:6/7 he attributes his inability to preach the Gospel in Asia and Bithynia to the action of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. It is not always easy to differentiate between the two sources; mature spiritual discernment is called for.

19. Just as it is impossible to exaggerate Paul's desire to visit them, so it is impossible to exaggerate his delight in them. It seems that of all his converts, the Thessalonians were especially dear him; they were the crowning achievement of his ministry. The basic meaning of *stephanos* is to encircle, and it refers to the award made for some success, such as the crowning of the bard. The word behind 'rejoicing' is also translated as boasting. What Paul has in mind here is his meeting with the Lord Jesus when he comes again. He longs to hear the words, "Well done good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21) and he believes that the faith of the Thessalonians will be something to present to his Lord with a rightful pride.

The return of Jesus is a prominent theme in the letters to the Thessalonians. The word *parousia* means literally 'to be with' and is certainly not confined to the second coming of the Lord. Paul will deal with this in greater detail in Chapter 4.

20. 'Glory' carries the idea of being highly esteemed and 'joy, that of delight. Thus the Thessalonians draw forth Paul's critical appreciation and his emotional warmth.

### Chapter 3

1. This verse highlights the problem of the pronoun 'we' in this epistle. Sometimes Paul seems to include Silas and Timothy (e.g. 1:2 where the 'we' immediately follows the naming of all three), at other times it takes on the character of the 'royal 'we' – referring to Paul only. Here he speaks of being left alone. Admittedly NIV has 'by ourselves', but that creates a problem in that it implies that Paul and Silas took the decision to send Timothy rather than all three being involved. Perhaps it is best not to approach the matter from an academic viewpoint. Paul was obviously a dominant personality and, although he would no doubt discuss matters with his colleagues, he would be used to having others fall in with his own ideas. Probably the 'we' reflects his own ideas but he assumed that he was speaking for all three of them.

Paul's concern for the Thessalonians and his inability to visit them personally became such a burden that he was willing to be left alone. To send Timothy (v.2) was a real deprivation for him because he met so much hostility in his preaching of the gospel. We all need company, especially when we face difficulties. Presumably Silas was still with Paul; nevertheless it was a sacrifice to send Timothy. The verb used is strong and can be translated as 'forsake' or 'abandon', revealing the strength of Paul's feeling.

Although Timothy went to the Thessalonians from Athens, that does not imply that Paul was still there when he wrote this letter.

2. There is a problem with the text here. We cannot be sure whether Paul is saying that Timothy, whom he calls a brother, was a fellow worker with God or with him, Paul. It would be very bold to describe any human as a fellow worker with God; nevertheless, that does embrace a truth. God works on earth through man. (Then I heard the voice of *the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'*" Isaiah 6:8) The fact that we are unworthy servants of almighty God has to be balanced with the knowledge that he has so ordained things that his will is to be done on earth through the

cooperation of human kind. Some translations use the term 'Minister of God'; Timothy was certainly that

The purpose in sending Timothy was more than to discover how they were getting on; it was to build up the Thessalonians in their faith. There are some keen Christians who seem to believe that it is enough to bring people to faith in Christ, as though that gets them to the finishing post. In fact, it gets them to the start of the race; faith has to be worked out every day of our lives.

3. There seems to be a general view, certainly in the West, that life owes us a living; that life should be fair. Perhaps in the ideal which God planned this was to be so. However, we live in a fallen world and life is neither fair nor easy. Whatever means of promoting growth God had provided in that ideal state in our fallen condition we need to encounter resistance if we are to mature. An airplane can only fly because of the resistance of the air; a chick can only survive if first it has built up its muscles by having to break through its shell. The times of greatest spiritual growth are those where we have had to overcome difficulties. As well as extolling the joys of the Christian life, we need to warn that it is not easy to live it. The true meaning of the word 'comfort' includes a stirring up, a motivating, and a strengthening. Paul gives no platitudes here; he encourages the Thessalonians to remain unshaken in their faith by reminding them bluntly that the Christian must expect trials and tribulations.

4. Apparently he had repeatedly warned them of this while he was with them and his warnings had already been fulfilled.

5. Having used the pronoun 'we' in v.1, here Paul uses 'I'. This reiterates the strength of his personal concern. Although the trials experienced by the Thessalonians are caused by their fellow countrymen (2:14), Paul is clear that the source is really Satan, here described as the tempter. Had they held true to their faith which Paul had worked so hard to instil?

6. We are almost exactly half way through this letter and there is a noticeable change in tone and atmosphere. Until now Paul has been looking back; here he turns to the future and the heaviness is lightened. Timothy has returned and Paul's concern is transformed to rejoicing in the news he has brought. Paul actually uses a word which in every other case in the New Testament refers to proclaiming the Gospel; Timothy has told forth good news. Not only has the faith of the Thessalonians proved strong but this is outworking in the fact that they are demonstrating godly love (agape) towards their fellow men. What is more, Timothy reports their warmth of heart for Paul and the others who brought them to faith. Their longing to meet up again is as great as his. Paul's cup is full.

7. Paul had had little to encourage him recently. Following his time in Thessalonica he had been violently opposed in Beroea and had been forced to leave there. He had made little impact in Athens and was now in Corinth, 'in weakness and in fear' (1 Cor.2:3). He says that he was suffering distress (thlipsis) which is a word used of women in childbirth but which also implies a burden or pressure on the spirit whether caused through the body or mind, and persecution (ananke). W.E. Vine states that ananke implies a necessity and here refers to a lack of material things. Whatever the cause, Paul was feeling low and no wonder he was concerned about the Thessalonians; with all his other disappointments were they still holding firm? He had sent Timothy not only to find out

but also to encourage them (3:2). In fact, the news Timothy brought had encouraged him (the word is *parakaleo* in both cases).

8. The news has been like a blood transfusion for Paul; he has a new lease of life. His work is not in vain – their standing firm or upright in the face of opposition is proof of that.

9. However, Paul does not attribute their standing firm to his own abilities as a good teacher; rather he sees it as proof of God's faithfulness. He has this upsurge of feeling that life is good and his immediate response is to give thanks to God for it. His great joy triggers the cry, "O God, how wonderful you are!"

10. The good news of the Thessalonians standing firm increases Paul's existing desire to see them again. He prays night and day for this to happen and then adds a very strong word – most earnestly (*huperekperissou*). This carries the meaning of 'abundantly' with the added emphasis of 'over' – 'over abundantly'. The reference to supplying what is lacking in their faith does not imply failure or wrong doing on the part of the Thessalonians; rather, the sense is of making progress. The Christian life is not static; we go on learning all our days or, at least, we should. The evangelist should be followed by the teacher, and Paul is both. Having won them to the Lord, he longs to instruct them further.

11. Having expressed his longing to be able to come to see them and told them that he continually prays that it might happen, Paul now actually does pray; asking that God will open or clear the way (the word means to make straight and hence guide or direct) for him and his fellow workers(?) to come. It is noteworthy that the verb 'direct' is in the singular and so Paul is closely linking Jesus and God the Father as one. Leon Morris (Tyndale N.T. Commentaries) points out that this is an early letter and reveals that the deity of our Lord Jesus was accepted at a very early date.

12. The last precept that Jesus left with his disciples before he was arrested was that they should love one another. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul says that the three attributes which abide in eternity are faith, hope and love, and he pronounces that the greatest of the three is love. Whatever we do or do not understand about our faith and its doctrines, we can all demonstrate love, although the sort of love he has in mind is a specialised form, *agape*, which is not natural to humankind. Ordinary love between humans usually depends upon the recipient of it drawing it from us by reason of something they have done or something they are; perhaps they have shown us some kindness or they are beautiful. *Agape* love does not depend upon anything in the recipient but upon the lover. There may be nothing attractive in the other person to draw love from the lover (while we were still sinners Christ died for us. [Rom. 5:8]); the lover loves because he is love. God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). For us to love even remotely as God loves, that love has to be given to us; it is given by the Lord through the Holy Spirit. Our part in this is not to seek to feel love but to will it; we decide what love requires and do it. So Paul prays that the Lord may impart it to these Thessalonians. He reassures them of his own love for them.

13. Paul repeats the word he has used in v.2 in praying that the Thessalonians may be built up in their faith. Although he uses the word 'heart', in his understanding this would involve what we, today, might refer to as the 'soul', embracing intellect, emotion and will; that is, all that we are as human beings.

Paul longs that they should be holy and blameless. There is a standard of behaviour recognised generally by society as being exemplary. It may not be capable of definition but certainly it is recognised. Holiness is something more. Actions which are not only accepted but which are advocated by society are not holy. Colours which appear to match under artificial light are exposed as flawed in the light of day. The Thessalonians, like the rest of us, will one day stand in the presence of God. Then our thoughts and deeds will be revealed as they truly are. Paul longs that his protégés will not be ashamed.

In thinking of judgement, Paul has a particular event in mind – the return of the Lord Jesus to earth. When he comes again he will not be ‘veiled in flesh’, but will be seen in all his glory. Elsewhere in Scripture he is depicted as coming with angels and also with the faithful departed, his saints. Paul does not elaborate on which he means by ‘holy ones’, angels or saints. Both are set apart for his service.

## Chapter 4

The word ‘finally’ may seem out of place coming only just over halfway through the letter. The root of the word means, ‘remaining’. It is as though Paul is saying, “Now let me clear up some other matters”. He reminds them that when he was with them he taught them how Christians ought to conduct themselves. Christianity is not simply an ideology; it is a walk, a way of living life which is different from the way of the world. Nor is it simply a matter of following precepts; it is far more personal than that; it is a way of pleasing the God. In urging them to be even more zealous in following this way, there is the implication that they have already made a start and are making progress. He believes that in telling them this, he is speaking for the Lord Jesus and develops this thought in the next verse.

2. The word for ‘instructions’ (‘commandments’ KJV) is one used within an army for orders passed down from above. Paul is claiming that the instructions for living which he gave them and which he is sure they will recall, carry the authority of what he received from Jesus himself.

3. The day a man signs up for the army he is a soldier. According to the books he is as much a soldier as the longest serving veteran of many campaigns. However, he then has to be taught to become a soldier; to become what he already is. So it is with the Christian. The day we claim Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, we become a Christian, a child of God. But then we have to become a Christian; to become what we are. The technical word to describe the former state is justification; the subsequent process is sanctification. The whole of our life from the day we follow Christ is to be given over to becoming holy.

The Church in the present age has an obsession with sex. Perhaps this is because the world is obsessed with it. Perhaps it has always had an obsession with it. Certainly today Christians seem to concentrate on sexual sins more than on greed, dishonesty, and disloyalty. We need to correct the balance. Having said that, however, there is no doubt that Christians are called upon to demonstrate the biblical standards of sexual morality in their own lives if the world is to see what God intended in making humankind sexual beings. Paul does not confine his instructions to sexual morality but he begins with this. It was necessary because society at the time had very lax sexual morals. To advocate chastity would be innovative and was to go against the prevailing culture

The NIV 'avoid' is hardly strong enough to convey the idea of a total break with all forms of sexual immorality (which is a better rendering than the KJV 'fornication' because the former is wider).

4. There is a real problem in understanding this verse. Literally it reads, 'everyone should know how to obtain his vessel in holiness and honour'. What is meant by vessel? Is it a man's own body or that of his wife? The word *ktaomai* implies acquiring or obtaining and would therefore be more appropriate in referring to something other than himself, i.e. his wife; although the effect of acquiring is to possess and so the word can mean that. The confusion as to its precise meaning is not all that important because the over-all instruction is clear; they are to avoid sexual impurity. The believer is set apart from evil by God and this setting apart or sanctification is to be worked out in daily living in all its aspects. The sense behind 'honour' is that of value. Sexuality is God-given and therefore to be valued and...

5. ...not cheapened by lust. Lax sexual morals were a feature of society at the time (indeed of most times) and Paul is insistent that the Christian has a different and higher standard. Perhaps Paul is implying more here than the fact that the heathen do not know God's standards; they do not experience his power. Part of learning how to control our natural desires, including our sexual drive, is to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us. It is similar to power-assisted-steering. The choice of direction is ours but when we choose the ways of God, he gives us strength to fulfil our decision.

6. The word 'to wrong' translates *huperbaino*, which means to go beyond or over step the mark; and 'take advantage' translates *pleonekteo*, to have more (here, more than one should, i.e. to defraud). In a case of adultery obviously the innocent husband or wife is cheated. But it also applies in the case of sex with someone who is not yet married because the future husband or wife will have been cheated. Even in cases of premarital sex it can be argued that there is cheating because the partner is being denied the security which marriage affords. The word 'brother' may, of course, refer to male relatives from the same parents, but can be extended over a widening group as far as meaning anyone in the community of humankind. Here it should not be limited to referring only to other Christians.

Paul insists that such behaviour will not go unpunished – literally, the Lord is the avenger. Sometimes we see the retribution at work in this life but, if not, Paul may well be referring to the Day of Judgement. He reminds them that he taught this retribution when he was with them and the words used are strong in the sense that he impressed this truth upon them.

7. Paul reiterates the point he made in v.3 – we are called to holiness, and it is God himself who calls us. Christianity is not a hobby, something to be fitted into a busy life as an interest. The teaching of our faith is that we were created by God for a purpose, and unless we are living in and moving towards that purpose, life is meaningless. He is to be the very centre of our lives. We have been called to live for him who is holy.

8. Paul speaks of those who reject this precept; literally, treat it as of no significance. He tells them that they are not ignoring the instructions of a man-made law but the will of God. In fact, by implication he takes it further. He speaks of the gift of the Holy Spirit who dwells within them. They will 'know' in the depths of their being, if only they will respond to his gentle but persistent influence, that immoral sexual behaviour is

wrong, and to indulge in it is to stunt their spiritual growth; not simply because it is wrong in itself but because they are resisting or quenching the work of the Spirit within them.

9/10. Another area in which the Spirit is at work is in instilling love within believers towards other believers. Whereas Paul had to teach them about the need for sexual morality, he did not have to instruct them about loving each other. Perhaps this was because the loose sexual morals prevalent in society at the time were so much part of the social custom that it had not occurred to these believers that there was anything wrong in such behaviour, and they needed to be shown that this was a violation of true love towards others (v.6). The word used here, *philadelphia*, is that which describes the love which members of a family have (or should have) towards each other. All who receive Jesus become children of God (John 1:12) and therefore members one of another as in a human family. The Thessalonians are already showing this and Paul encourages them to exhibit it even more.

The reference to Macedonia may imply that there were more churches in the area than we know about today.

11/12. The word behind 'ambition' is *philotimeomai* (literally to love honour), hence to make it one's aim or ambition. The reference to a quiet life refers to inner disposition. We all have different temperaments, but we are responsible for whether we are controlled by our natural reactions or by the Holy Spirit. Also, says Paul, we should concentrate on getting ourselves right rather than trying to improve everyone else and meddling in their affairs. The word 'own' has no following noun in the original and 'business' is added to make sense. Literally it reads, "look to, or busy yourself with, your own".

In his second letter to the Thessalonians Paul refers to those who refuse to work – "not busy but busybodies" – probably because they were expecting Jesus to return very shortly. Or it could be that because the believers were caring for each other, some were taking advantage of this and were, in effect, living on the charity of others. Leon Morris comments that the Greeks did not esteem manual labour, seeing it as the work of a slave. Paul will have none of that and instructs them to work with their own hands. The whole of this verse relates to the demeanour of the Christians amongst their fellow men. He is concerned that they should win the respect of unbelievers by the way they conduct themselves. The A.V. has that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, which is rather cumbersome for today. The word translated 'honestly' is *euschemonos* which we would understand as 'decently' or 'becomingly'.

There is also some doubt about the meaning of the final sentence. A.V. has, "so that ye will have lack of nothing", whereas NRSV has, "be dependent on no one". The REB has, "so that you may command the respect of those outside your own number, and at the same time never be in want."

13. It is probable that some of the Thessalonians had misunderstood Paul's teaching about the return of Jesus, the Parousia. Parousia is literally 'presence', 'to be with', and sometimes it is used in that sense alone. However, it often refers to the return of Jesus to gather his believers, both those who have died and those still alive, and to be with them for evermore. Some in Thessalonica were expecting the Parousia immediately and so problems arose when some of their number began to die; had they missed out? (The original is literally "are falling asleep".) Paul is anxious to allay their doubts – one of the

most important and comforting of Christian doctrines is that death has been defeated; defeated though not yet destroyed. Death is still an enemy (1 Cor.15:26) and Christians are not spared the pain of intense grief at the death of a loved one; that is an experience common to all. A Christian, however, has a hope (hope in the sense of it being certain and sure, but not yet realised); death is not the end but a gateway into a fuller and more glorious life for which this life is but a preparation. Paul goes on to explain just what this hope is.

14. The ground for our hope of resurrection is not that of teaching or words alone; the instruction and the words are based on facts. Resurrection from death has happened in a human life. Jesus, a man of flesh and blood, died and then he rose from that death to life. If that had not happened we would surely all be filled with the doubt that such an event is an impossibility. Whilst the death and resurrection of Jesus is not in itself an absolute guarantee that the same will happen to us who believe in him, it is no longer unreasonable to believe that it will, because it has happened to one human being, Jesus, already. If the promise of Jesus that he would die and then be raised to life is true, as it is, then it is reasonable to believe that he can fulfil his other promise that he will raise to life all who believe in him (John 6:40). That is the point Paul is making in this verse. In fact, he adds further information which will be developed in the next verses; the dead in Christ will come with him.

The description of the dead as having fallen asleep may convey a state of unconsciousness. Are those who die in a sort of limbo? Such a situation is not necessarily unwelcome; it means that death is no more terrible than drifting into sleep and waking up to find that the consummation of all things has already happened and we are part of it. However, it seems that that is not what Paul believes. Elsewhere he refers to his own death in the following terms, "I desire to depart and be with Christ." (Philp. 1:23) This might mean to be with him but not conscious of the fact, but it is unlikely. It may be simply that the word 'death' creates an impression of finality, whereas to speak of 'sleep' conveys the hope of continuation after a period of rest – something far more encouraging. Nevertheless, Paul is not afraid to use the term 'death'; in this very verse he refers to the fact that Jesus died and in v.16 he speaks of believers as 'the dead in Christ'.

We cannot be certain exactly what Paul is seeking to convey here. Is he saying that God will bring with Jesus all who have died or he will bring only those who are dead but in Christ? Different translations reveal the possible interpretations. So too will God bring those who died as Christians to be with Jesus. (REB) Even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. (NKJV) It will be the same for those who have died in Jesus: God will bring them with him. (Jerusalem) We can believe that God will just as *surely bring with Jesus all who are 'asleep' in him. (Phillips)* Even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. (NRSV) It follows that by means of Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. (Moffatt) In the same way also through Jesus God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. (Weymouth) It will be seen that the last three imply that all the dead are involved. Whilst the majority view is that those who died as believers will come with Christ when he returns (i.e. at the Parousia), the REB does not necessarily imply this; rather that eventually those who die as Christians will be brought to glory by Jesus.

15. Before considering the meaning of this verse it is necessary to clear up one or two peripheral matters. Paul claims that his statements are based on the very words of Jesus. However, we have no record of these in the four gospels (although Matthew

24:31 contains some of this truth). Obviously not all that Jesus said has been recorded for us and perhaps one of the disciples told Paul of this additional teaching of our Lord; or it could be that Paul is claiming that this was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, but it would be an unusual way to express that idea.

Some commentators hold that by speaking of ‘we who are alive’, Paul is expecting Jesus to return within his own lifetime. However, consider the alternative; had he written ‘you who are alive’, that would imply that he certainly did not expect an imminent return, and that would be dangerous. Of the alternatives Paul has made the better choice. It has been said, rightly, that we need to plan as though Jesus will not return in our lifetime but to live in the expectation that he will come today.

The error in thinking which Paul is correcting here is that the Thessalonians apparently feared that those who had died were at a disadvantage and that their resurrection would be delayed, perhaps even forfeited. Today, we have the opposite error, we assume that the dead are already in heaven, i.e. they have preceded us. It seems that Paul is giving a different view. When believers die they go to be with Jesus. In writing to the Philippians Paul is debating whether it is better that he should be allowed to continue in this life or to be executed, and he says, I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. [Phil 1:23] However, to die and go to be with the Lord is not the final consummation, as Paul explains in the remaining verses of this chapter.

16. Here we have the fullest description Scripture gives of the Parousia. How literally are we to take it? There is little doubt that Paul’s intention is to convey the drama of the event. It will be sudden. There will be a shout, *keleusma*, which describes a military shout of command. Who will give it? Is it the voice of the archangel mentioned in the next phrase? Or is it the voice of the returning Lord himself? Elsewhere (e.g. Matt. 24:26) Scripture implies that the decision as to when this is to happen will be taken by God the Father alone.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible refers to only one archangel – Michael; the title is only mentioned twice, here and Jude v.9. The apocrypha in 2 Esdras 4:36 refers to an archangel Jeremiel.

The sound of a trumpet is often associated with the presence, and particularly the activity, of God; e.g. when he met with his people at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16 & 19); when he caused the collapse of the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6:16 & 20) – although here it was not a supernatural sound but the trumpet was blown by a human being. Jesus himself refers to it in Matthew 24:31 and Paul, again, in 1 Corinthians 15:52.

The reference to the dead in Christ being the first to rise raises the question, “Rise from what?” Are the dead indeed in a state of unconscious sleep (see v.14 para. 2 above)? If not, then this statement implies that there is, nevertheless, an important change in their condition which occurs at the Parousia. Are the dead in Christ with him but in a disembodied state? In the light of 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, it seems that Paul did not expect to be unclothed (i.e. without a spiritual or heavenly body), although he gives no time scale and so it could be that we have a period without a body and gain it later (cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-54). Certainly there is to be a major alteration to existence at the consummation of all things when death is finally destroyed (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20-28.)

17. Some commentators believe that the fact that Paul uses the word 'we' implies that he believed he would be alive at the time Jesus returns. That is not necessarily so. Paul has a vivid sense of the fellowship of all believers within eternity; he is saying, "We who are dead...we who are alive..."

The word Paul uses for 'caught up' carries a sense of sudden violence; 'snatched up' conveys something of the meaning. There are so many questions we want to ask. Will we go floating into the air with our bodies, to be watched by all who do not believe? Will it simply be our spirits that ascend to be given spiritual bodies later? The implication of 1 Corinthians 15:50-54 seems to be that our physical bodies will be changed suddenly into spiritual bodies at that moment; the dead having been given their spiritual bodies immediately prior to that. Paul does not elaborate; probably it is a truth we could not understand now but it will all be so obvious and reasonable at the time. Through all of this explanation we need to remember that Paul is not seeking to give a comprehensive account of the total effect of the Parousia, but he is seeking to allay the fears of some of the Thessalonians that those believers who have died will be deprived. "Not at all," he says, "they get there first and we join them; not the other way around."

## Chapter 5

1. Paul has spent some time in explaining what will happen at the Parousia and who will be involved. It might be supposed that this will give rise to the question, when will it happen? Paul says he does not need to write about this; presumably because he dealt with it in his teaching when he was with them. He uses two words for time, *chronos* which refers to time measured by a clock, and *kairos* which relates more to an epoch e.g. the time in which we live, the time of harvest. He is saying "With regard to the actual date or period..."

2. The reason he does not need to give the information is that they are aware it is not available. The Parousia will come as a surprise – a thief in the night - and they already know that. The term 'Day of the Lord' is ancient (Amos 5:18 & 20). The Jews looked for it as the day of their vindication when all the other nations would be judged. However, as Amos made clear, Israel would be included in that time of universal judgement. Whilst Paul's reference to the suddenness of the Lord's appearing indicates that it will involve an actual moment in time, the phrase may well carry the meaning of an epoch (*kairos*).

3. In this verse Paul does not specify those he has in mind; he speaks of 'they' and the NIV uses 'people'. Obviously he is excluding his readers and thinking of unbelievers. No doubt John would refer to 'the world'. It is when they are relaxing under the impression that everything is secure and certain (peace and safety) that sudden destruction will come. In speaking of the Parousia, Paul has referred only to the rapture of believers at the coming of the Lord; here he turns to the situation relating to the rest of humankind. He speaks of destruction. That does not necessarily mean total annihilation - although it may. An earthquake may destroy a building but the rubble remains. Certainly Paul has in mind ruination in the sense that they will be excluded from the plan and purpose of God and no one will be overlooked. In Mark 13:8 Jesus likens the coming of the kingdom to birth pains. As well as the suddenness and inevitability of the event, therefore, Paul may well intend to convey the idea of new life.

4. The contrast between the darkness of the world (society organised apart from God) and the light which Christ brings, is a constant theme of Scripture. It embraces both the

idea of blindness and of evil. Paul reminds his readers that they are not living in darkness as unbelievers do. A person who is living close to Christ will not be taken unawares when he returns. This must not be taken to mean (as some cults hold) that believers can know the exact date when this will occur, but rather that, being aware that the return of Christ will come without further warning, they will be ready for it.

5. Paul uses a double description in speaking of light and day, and similarly with night and darkness. The term 'sons' implies a belonging - as children belong to a family. Believers belong to and operate within the realm of knowledge or understanding of the ultimate purpose of God, the day of the Lord; they are neither 'in the dark' about the truth nor live outside it.

6. The word that Paul uses here for sleep (katheudo) is different from that used in ch.4:13-15 (koimaomai) . However, probably we should not make too much of a distinction between natural sleep and moral indifference because in the next verse (7) he continues to use the former (katheudo) when he is referring to the fact that we sleep at night. It is more likely that having used koimaomai to link death as a form of sleep – where there is the happier connotation of continuing existence even if a person is removed from participation in the affairs of this life - Paul chooses to use a different word to link the ignorance of what is happening in the world while we are asleep with the blind indifference of those who are outside Christ.

Because believers are aware that the Parousia will be sudden they should be alert – literally 'watchful'. They should also be sober; although the word nepho is used to denote freedom from intoxicants, there is no need to assume that the Thessalonian Christians were given to drunkenness (even though Paul refers to that state in v.7). The NIV 'self-controlled' probably conveys Paul's meaning correctly. Self-control should be the mark of a Christian, although it is probably more accurate to speak of Spirit-control – provided we do not confuse that with the type of spirit control involved in spiritist mediums. It is akin to power assisted steering in motor vehicles; the driver decides the direction and he is helped by the power assisted system. As a responsible person the believer makes the decision to live or act in a certain way and, provided that is the way of Christ, the Holy Spirit comes alongside with his power to enable him or her to fulfil that decision.

7. Paul is playing with ideas here – the interplay between the physical and the spiritual. It is at night that people sleep and cannot watch, and they get drunk and thus lose their self-control.

8. Continuing the line of argument, Paul is saying that we are enlightened to the truth and so we are able to watch, and we can and should exercise self-control (once again the word is nepho, see v.6). We human beings act not according to facts but how we perceive those facts. A parent takes a knife away from a child because of love for the child but the child screams because he or she perceives it as an act of un-love and deprivation. It would be wrong to push Paul's depiction of body armour too far, but it is true that a helmet protects the head where, with the brain, we understand and store facts. The fact of our salvation (wholeness for eternity) is certain and sure (see note on 1:3 for a definition of Christian hope) and if we fully understand the implication of that fact it will strengthen our faith and encourage our love, which involve our will and our emotion which in common understanding are not confined to the brain alone and Paul uses the description of a breastplate – although, in Paul's culture, the heart would not be regarded as the seat of emotion as we tend to do today.

9. This verse raises the complex issue of predestination and freewill. Paul does not use the word 'predestinate' here but rather a word used elsewhere to relate to the appointment of someone to an office or role. Some translations use 'destined', but even that may be too strong because, following on from his argument in the previous verses, there is a clear direction that we ought to exercise our freewill to be watchful and self-controlled. Whatever Paul may teach about predestination elsewhere, that is not his main argument here. What is clear is that it is not God's intention that we should suffer wrath but that we should be saved. However, there is another problem about the meaning of the phrase 'to obtain salvation'. Is it 'to receive' (NIV) or 'for the full attainment of' (REB) salvation? That is, is our salvation a sovereign choice by God, or is it a freewill choice, for which we have to work, on our part? This verse cannot be used to give conclusive evidence one way or the other. All down the centuries different theologians have taken different sides. For myself, I believe that God chose me to be saved, so the initiative is with him, but I chose to respond to his choice.

Paul speaks of wrath. Many seek to play down this aspect of the Christian Faith. It is true that God does not have passions as we do – he does not lose his temper. However his nature is such that sin cannot exist in his presence anymore than darkness can exist in the light of the sun. However patient God may be, in the final state of all things nothing contrary to perfect goodness and righteousness can remain because, were it to do so, that state would not be perfect goodness and righteousness. Because God is personal and it must be his will that evil should be destroyed, it is right for us to speak of God's wrath but that must not be taken to involve vindictiveness.

10. In other letters, notably Romans and Galatians, Paul develops a careful and detailed argument of our redemption through the death of Jesus. Here, no doubt because he would have explained the doctrine carefully to the Thessalonians when he was with them, he summarises it in the words, "He died for us so that we may live together with him".

His reference to 'awake or asleep' is somewhat confusing because the most recent use of these words is in vv. 6 & 7, where they relate to the natural daily cycle of sleeping and waking. However, he has in mind what has given rise to the whole of this section of his letter – the concern of his readers about those believers who have died – have they missed out on the Parousia? (see v.13). Thus here, 'Awake or asleep' revert to the meaning 'alive or dead'.

11. Having given a careful and reasoned explanation that we have a hope that is certain and sure, he exhorts his readers to encourage (*parakaleo* i.e. strengthen) and build up one another. No doubt because he does not want them to think he is admonishing them, he assures them that he believes they are already doing this.

12. As he draws to the end of his letter Paul refers to matters which were probably not raised by the Thessalonians themselves but which Timothy conveyed to him (3:6) as a result of his own observations. One of the issues relates to leadership in the church. This is never easy and different churches deal with it in different ways. Should leaders be elected and, if so, by whom? (By the whole fellowship or by the existing leaders?) Or should they be appointed, perhaps by a more senior leader or by trustees? Then there is the question of the relationship between the leaders and their flock. In the commercial world or the armed forces there is a constraint in that people are in paid employment

and have a responsibility to their employer which will include obedience towards those who are set over them. In the church there is no such constraint; obedience and service are offered voluntarily, and so there is greater freedom for individuals to object to the decisions made by their leaders.

From the instructions Paul offers it seems likely that there had been some ill-feeling between the members of the church and their leaders. Possibly the latter had been a little overbearing or over zealous; even so the priority in Paul's mind is that their authority should be respected. The alternative would be chaos. It is a difficult path to tread but Paul is in no doubt that sometimes it is the duty of a leader to admonish. However, in Col.3:16 he writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom", which implies that such admonishments are to be based on and in line with the word of God, not the personal whim of an individual leader. The word 'respect' is actually to 'know' (eido) in the sense of to recognise e.g. their authority.

13. Paul's exhortation goes further than mere respect for authority; the leaders should be held in high regard, esteemed. Their role is a difficult and demanding one. Leaders are on the journey too, they are making their own way to heaven and haven't passed this way before. It is not to be a case of grudging submission but loving obedience, with peace pervading the whole fellowship. For this to happen the leaders must obviously not adopt a dictatorial or overbearing attitude.

14. Here, apparently, Paul has the leaders in mind, although (with the possible exception of the first instruction) his advice applies to all believers. The word 'warn' is actually the same as that translated 'admonish' in v.12 (q.v.). 'Idle' is a translation of ataktos which is somewhat wider in meaning. Used in a military context it refers to disorderly or insubordinate conduct. Nevertheless most translations centre on the aspect of idleness. They are to encourage or strengthen those who are timid – oligopsuchos, literally 'small souled' i.e. despondent or faint hearted.

They are to hold onto the weak. It is interesting that in Romans 14 Paul regards those with an over sensitive conscience as being weak. At first sight it may seem that to observe all sorts of religious rules and regulations is to have a strong faith; in fact, it may be a sign of insecurity and indecision. Such people often exhibit a very strong motivation for a period and then appear to abandon their faith almost entirely, or certainly the practice of it. Those whose faith is actually rather stronger need to hold onto their weaker fellow believers.

Having referred to their attitude towards the idle the timid and the weak, Paul gives a general instruction of behaviour towards everyone; be patient, longsuffering. ("Longsuffering is that quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish; it is the opposite of anger, and is associated with mercy." W.E.Vine) Many of us believers find this particularly difficult. When provoked our immediate reaction is so often unchristian and requires repentance.

15. This verse develops the last thought. Retaliation is not only a knee-jerk reaction; it may be based on the principle of justice, particularly when the wrong is done to someone other than ourselves when our personal sense of affront is not so involved. We feel that someone who does wrong deserves to have wrong done to them. It may be that the preservation of law and order requires some form of punishment, but even then it is often ineffective. That simply enhances the view that violence of one sort or another is

inevitable. However, such punishment is consequent upon a due process of law undertaken rationally; it is not motivated by emotion. In our personal dealings with each other the Christian, following the example of the Lord, is to absorb the wrong, transmute it and issue it back in love. Of course, this is how we should act towards each other within the Christian fellowship but it should be the way we behave towards everyone. Our actions should be determined not by the sort of person others are, but the person we are.

16. Joy is different from happiness; it is deeper and less dependent on outward circumstances. For the Christian it must be closely linked with faith. The certainty that God is, that he loves and cares for us infinitely, and that we are within his eternal purpose and our place in heaven is sure, give us a security and contentment. It was this that Paul experienced even in his greatest trials and which he commends here to his readers. The stronger our faith the greater will be our joy. It was the joy set before him which enabled Jesus to face the cross (Heb.12:2).

17. God is always expressing himself; he is always at work, redeeming, restoring, making whole. He is not sitting there on his throne patiently waiting for us to galvanise him into action by one of our prayers. So with our prayers, we are simply earthing what God is already doing in heaven. In theological terms we are incarnating his action of eternally expressing himself. No wonder, therefore, that we can ask only for what is in accordance with his name i.e. his will. He will not supply or deliver what is not his will; he is not in the business of bringing in our will but his.

How important it is, therefore, when we pray that first we seek to know the mind of the Lord. If we ask anything according to his will, of course we will get it, because it is his will that we should have it long before the thought occurred to us to ask for it. On the other hand, God will not force his will on us; he waits for us to desire it and then ask for it. As James put it in his letter, "*You have not because you ask not*". When God created this world he made humankind its custodian, giving us dominion (lordship) over it and, in spite of our fall, he has not gone back on that. That is why Paul tells the Thessalonians to pray continually. To bring God's will on earth was always intended to be a co-operation between himself and us. The power is his - we have the privilege of directing it.

18. We cannot control what happens to us in life, but we can always control how we respond to what happens to us. It is how we respond that determines the person we become, the person who will go on in eternity. Many of the things that happen may be unpleasant but it is a truth that we gain most in character when we face difficulties, unwelcome as they may be. Many can testify that there are some experiences which we would not choose to undergo again but which we would not now change, even if we could, because of the effect they have had in making us who we are. That does not mean that we must necessarily thank God for the event which brought about the experience. How can parents give thanks for the accident which killed their child? We are not required to give thanks for the work of Satan. Paul's injunction is to give thanks in not for all circumstances.

Paul's comment that this is the will of God for us, almost certainly refers to all three instructions he has given in verses 16-18. It is in Christ Jesus because it is through Jesus that God expresses himself, his will to us. It is also through our abiding in Christ Jesus that we experience the benefit of his will.

19. The reference to quenching conjures up the picture of water used against fire. When the Holy Spirit fell upon the apostles on the Day of Pentecost he was seen as tongues of fire on each. The work of the Holy Spirit has many aspects: sometimes there are the more sensational manifestations of speaking in tongues and their interpretation and also the working of miracles; but there are also the gentle promptings within us to do or say something particular, or a sudden clarity of understanding. The former may be embarrassing to witness and the latter may be so gentle that we doubt their reality and assume that they are our own inner desires. Paul encourages his readers not to frustrate the work that the Holy Spirit is doing. There may well be the need to control or direct that work, as Paul himself advocated in 1 Corinthians 14, but not to quench it.

20-21. Paul singles out prophecy as an area of the Spirit's work which was, apparently, being treated lightly, even with contempt. There is always the danger that, either intentionally or subconsciously, a person may seek to further his or her personal preferences and desires under the guise of it being the Lord's will. For this reason it is important that prophecies should be tested as to whether they are genuinely of the Lord. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. [1 Cor 14:29] A prophet is one to whom the Lord reveals his view and attitude towards events. This may involve a view of the future but more frequently it relates to the current situation.

The instruction to hold to what is good may follow on from what Paul has just said – test the prophecies and only accept what is genuine. However, almost certainly it has a wider connotation in the light of the next verse.

22. The word 'avoid' or 'abstain' is a strong one implying complete separation. Paul refers to every 'appearance' of evil which could imply that he is speaking only of evil which is visible; but this is to take a too literal view. Surely he means, 'wherever it is to be found'. Leon Morris makes the interesting point that good is a unity; it is one, whereas evil may take many forms.

23. Paul is now preparing to close his letter. He has given a number of fairly detailed instructions and explanations, but he now lifts his readers to a higher plane. We have to live out our lives in a material and physical world which is not operating as God originally planned, it is out of kilter. However, the believer has already entered the eternal, spiritual realm which exists alongside this one. It is a realm in which the will of God is paramount and the power of God (its energy being self-giving love) pervades everything. The more a person allows this spiritual realm to exist in him and he or she in it, the more they are sustained 'above' the pressures which would hold them captive to this world. The state of living in this spiritual realm has to be broken down into specific and detailed instructions for our minds to understand the principles by which we are to live in this world. This is what Paul has been doing in this letter. However, necessary as it is to do this, it cannot do justice to the spiritual reality any more than we can put into words the beauty of a piece of music or a great painting; or, indeed, than detailed laws can produce what genuine love will effect as its inherent consequence.

In this verse Paul is asking that his readers will be kept in this spiritual realm by God. The Greek word for peace is the corresponding word to the Hebrew shalom, which is the normal Jewish greeting and implies total well being and contentment. Such well being and contentment can exist only in righteousness – hence his desire that they should be sanctified. The NIV 'through and through' translates a rarely used word meaning 'entirely'.

Theologians argue whether humankind is bi-partite (body and soul/spirit) or tri-partite (body, soul, and spirit). Some commentators believe that by using all three terms here Paul is simply meaning the whole person and not expressing a detailed doctrine. However, even if that is true, it reveals Paul's way of thinking of the human personality. The tripartite view seems to be upheld elsewhere in Scripture; For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing *soul and spirit...* [Heb 4:12] However, the unity of all three is emphasised by the fact that the verb 'kept' is singular. Morris points out that the phrase is not 'until' the coming of Jesus, but 'at' his coming. In other words, that they will survive the judgement which his coming will bring.

24. When we respond to God's call we may look back and say, truthfully that he called us. However, God is continually active and so his call is continuous; it is not simply a past action, he is the God who calls us. Paul is certain that his prayer for the Thessalonians will be answered because it is in line with the Lord's will. Nevertheless, there is the question, will it happen without their co-operation? Surely God does not override our free will. Our free will is the only thing which is truly our own, without it we would have no value as persons because we would be nothing more than robots and have nothing to offer our God in response to his love for us. The power to keep believers on the day of judgement belongs to and comes from God, but each believer must maintain contact, or at least the desire for contact, with God for that power to flow.

25. All of us believers will know someone who has helped us in our journey of faith. Maybe he or she seems to us to be so far ahead of us, so experienced, so holy, as to appear to us to be a 'super' Christian. But he or she will be only too aware of their own failings and weakness. They will need our prayers – and Paul has no false pride about this; he covets the prayers of those who are his pupils and protégés. Occasionally there may be a leader who is reluctant actually to submit to the prayers of those he leads, kneeling before them, because, he or she imagines, it may lessen their authority. In the view of those in their flock who are true believers, it enhances it.

26. This, surely, should not be interpreted as referring to the members of the church greeting each other, although that was a custom when they met together; rather it is Paul signing off with a warmth of expression for those so dear to his heart – 'with my love to all of you'.

27. Paul makes a strong point that this letter should be read to all the believers. Perhaps there was a danger that where there was a difference of opinion over the matters Paul has dealt with, some of the leaders might not want Paul's views shared with those with whom they disagreed. Or perhaps he wanted to ensure that his teaching, which he had expressed so carefully, should be given in his own words and not summarised by the leaders. Or maybe he just wanted to make contact with all the members that they might know of his personal appreciation of each one. What is a little surprising is the strength of his instruction – a command in the name of the Lord. Did he suspect that there was a greater division between the members than he has referred to in the letter? In view of his praise (1:2-10 and 5:11) it seems unlikely. (But see 2 Thes. 2:2.) If, as it seems his custom was, Paul dictated this letter and then signed it himself, apparently this charge (v.27) is an after thought penned by himself – the 'us' of v.26 becomes 'I' here.

28. There is little comment to make. It was Paul's custom to conclude his letters with the 'grace of the Lord' although its precise form varied a little.

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