

1 Thessalonians Devotionals & Sermon Illustrations

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Devotionals from Today in the Word

1 Thessalonians 1

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Paul visited Thessalonica around 49-50 A.D. on his second missionary journey, the city was a center of travel, commerce and communication. Cassander, one of Alexander the Great's army officers, had founded the city in the fourth century B.C. and named it after his wife (one of Alexander's half-sisters).

As the capital city of the province of Macedonia, Thessalonica boasted a strategically-located harbor filled with ships from throughout the Roman Empire. The main highway from Rome to the East passed through the city as well, and the nearby hot springs of Therma were world-famous.

Paul, Silas and Timothy walked into this major port city of 200 people with a revolutionary message--the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ!

The story of Paul's experience in Philippi (Acts 16) is so familiar that we often forget to read on and find out where he went next. The answer is in Acts 17:1. He headed for Thessalonica, making that city only the second place in Europe where the gospel was preached!

The wounds on Paul's back from his beating in Philippi (Acts 16:23-24) may still have been hurting when he arrived in Thessalonica. He was treated roughly there, too (Acts 17:5), eventually having to leave town under cover of darkness (Acts 17:10).

But some great things happened first! After Paul preached Jesus as the Messiah to the Jews for three Sabbaths, many people believed (Acts 16:2-4). Paul may have stayed several more months in Thessalonica, ministering among the Gentiles. However long his ministry, Paul planted a church there and felt a deep love for the Thessalonian believers.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul's threefold commendation in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 is one any sincere believer would be pleased to receive. The Thessalonians were known for their diligent work in spreading the gospel and for their endurance under severe trial--all of which were inspired by their faith, love and hope in Jesus Christ.

Acts 17:1-15; 1 Thessalonians 1:1

We boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. - 2 Thessalonians 1:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

On November 9, 2007, Christianity Today interviewed Carl Moeller, president of Open Doors USA, part of the organization founded in 1955 by Brother Andrew. Moeller shared: "I just became aware of a story of a family in Indonesia whose daughter was one of three girls who were attacked by Muslim extremists in 2004... [The mothers'] effort on behalf of the cause of Christ to forgive those who had done the most horrible things to their families and their daughters is a testimony of the way the Christians are called to respond... When people die in the name of Jesus Christ, it presents a strong testimony to the culture... The church is

correspondingly growing.”

For two thousand years, persecuted Christians have attested the reality of the gospel. Consider today's reading. Thessalonica was a commercial city located on a major Roman road. Paul's efforts here reflect his pattern of planting churches in strategic cities. Thessalonica had a large Jewish population and at least one synagogue. It's unclear how long Paul stayed in Thessalonica. Acts 17 mentions three Sabbaths, but it's likely that Paul was in Thessalonica a bit longer. The Philippians sent at least one monetary gift to Paul during this time (Phil. 4:16), which also suggests a longer stay. Paul's success in Thessalonica, however, was not without opposition. Some Jews became jealous of the number of Gentile converts to Christianity. Because Thessalonica was a free city, its rulers were eager to avoid any disturbance that would threaten its independence from Rome. The pledge required of Jason may have included some type of guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave the city.

The Thessalonian church was formed in such circumstances. Paul's two letters to this church—our focus this month—were likely written from Corinth around a.d. 50 or 51. Although he was forced to leave Thessalonica, Paul deeply cared about this young church, as these two letters reveal.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The opening verse of 1 Thessalonians contains valuable insights. First, notice the importance of team ministry. Written by Paul, the letter's salutation shows the important part played by Silas and Timothy in the work of the gospel. Next, despite persecution, the position of the Thessalonians—in God and in Christ—was secure. Finally, consider the greeting “grace and peace.” Grace is God's unmerited gift, which results in peace. Grace and peace come only from being in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 -

Poet Emily Dickinson observed, “A word is dead when it's been said, some say. I say it just begins to live that day.” This is especially true when it comes to God's words. All words have power, but God's words convey the power of God. The word of God is “alive and active” (Heb. 4:12). One proof of this is the effect that the gospel had on those who heard it in Thessalonica. Despite opposition, many in Thessalonica responded to Paul's message with faith. This was a work of the Holy Spirit (vv. 4–5).

The gospel's power is also demonstrated in its capacity to transform those who believe its message. For the Thessalonian Christians, faith was more than a verbal affirmation of what they believed about Jesus; their faith was reflected in their actions. This change was brought about by the Holy Spirit, but they also needed to see someone modeling this kind of life of faith. The Thessalonians learned how to live the Christian life by observing and imitating Paul. They in turn became a model to the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (vv. 6–7). Paul gave them an example of holding to the word despite suffering. This may be a reference to the opposition he experienced while in Thessalonica and later in Berea.

By following Paul's example, the Thessalonians became imitators of Christ and channels of God's love. The resulting transformation of their lives caused others to take note and comment. In this way their lives became a sounding board that amplified the truth of the gospel, causing it to “ring out” from Thessalonica to the surrounding regions (vv. 8–10). This was not a silent witness. Those who heard about the Thessalonians' change in lifestyle also learned about the gospel message that prompted it. The ultimate focus of their message was Jesus, God's resurrected and coming Son who rescues us from the judgment to come.

APPLY THE WORD - Paul's description of the Thessalonians' response to the gospel helps to clarify the relationship between faith and action in the Christian life. Christian living is a response to faith, not a basis for faith. We act because we have been acted upon by God's Spirit. We live the Christian life because we are Christians, not in order to become Christians. Believe—and be transformed.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. - 1 Thessalonians 1:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Just follow the pattern sounds like easy advice for anyone who wants to sew. It's simple for the seamstress or tailor, maybe, but many amateurs find sewing patterns far from simple. To open the pattern package, unfold the tissue, and then read and make sense of the corresponding instructions is a feat itself! What helps is a good pattern. It offers clear directions, visual aids, and sketches of the final product.

Paul has high praise for the church in Thessalonica. Their example of faith, hope, and love is a pattern for others to follow. As our key verse says, they have become a model for other churches. In fact, in many ways, the Thessalonians exemplify many of the healthy qualities that we have already discussed should be expected of the churches of Jesus Christ.

First, the Thessalonians are a church because of their identity in Jesus Christ (1Thes 1:3). Although their work and service are

commendable, these don't make them a church. They are a church because they have believed the gospel message (1Th 1:5).

This belief, then, is proved genuine by their repentance (1Th 1:9). They gave up their former idolatry. When they turned toward Christ for salvation, they turned away from the idols they once worshiped. They didn't add God to a palette of various religious preferences. They accepted Christ as true and rejected idols as false.

Repentance leads to a resemblance to Christ (1Th 1:6). They now have different values, choices, and priorities—they want to imitate the Lord and walk in His steps. The Thessalonians are a good pattern for us to follow because they're following the pattern set before them of Christ Himself.

Finally, the Thessalonians embraced their mission from God. Their faith produced service and missionary zeal (v. . They jumped into God's purposes with both feet after their conversion.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes people like the Thessalonians make us envious. We wonder why we're not growing and spiritually maturing as they are. It's challenging to know that the Thessalonians aren't held up as an example because they are in some way extraordinary, "super-spiritual" people. They're just like us—if we are in Christ, being both loved by God and chosen by God (1Th 1:4). We can be these kinds of churches when we surrender ourselves fully to the Lordship of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-5

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. - James 2:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

"I can't imagine a happier life than the one I have now," says Lilya, a divorced mother of three. Given her background, this is remarkable. Born in an atheist home in Moldova during the Soviet era, Lilya had never heard about Jesus Christ. After her divorce, she ended up living with an abusive boyfriend. She left him and moved to her mother's village where she met Christians who loved her and shared God's Word with her. Now she, her mother, and her three sons attend church each week. Lilya exclaims, "I want to tell others about His boundless love! I want to tell them how God freed my heart."

Lilya's story shows why testimonies are such powerful evangelistic tools. Faith, love, and hope can't be seen physically in the way that height, eye color, or hair style can be. Yet these three qualities are clear evidence of lives changed by the gospel. In the opening verses of 1 Thessalonians, Paul praises God for such evidence of the gospel among the Thessalonians.

Their obedient trust in Jesus Christ was manifest in their actions. Later on, we'll see that this included contributing to the relief fund for the Jerusalem church. Next, we see that their true Christian love prompted an intentional effort that Paul here describes as "labor." Finally, the Thessalonians persevered, indicating their hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

These three qualities—faith, hope, and love, —occur together frequently in the New Testament. Their manifestation among the Thessalonians confirmed to Paul that God had chosen and redeemed them and was working through His Spirit to develop Christlikeness. In God's sovereign purposes, believers aren't chosen and redeemed because they are better than others or have more intrinsic goodness than those people who reject the good news of God's salvation. Rather, God calls His people so that they might serve Him and bring Him glory. Today's passage also makes it clear that salvation proceeds from God's love, not our goodness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Like Lilya, the gospel came to the Thessalonians with life-changing power. The triad of faith, love, and hope is only possible with another triad—power, the Holy Spirit, and deep conviction (1Th 1:5). It's the gospel's power working through the Holy Spirit that convicts individuals and changes lives. In preparation for our study this month, prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to show you if there are any attitudes or habits that block the expression of faith, love, and hope in your life.

1 Thessalonians 1:4-7

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to recent reports, British researchers working in Antarctica have mapped out a lake of unfrozen fresh water as big as Lake Ontario, buried two-and-a-half miles beneath the ice! The lake is 124 miles long and averages 400 feet in depth. Scientists believe it contains perfectly preserved samples of ancient bacteria, viruses and plant forms, making it a potentially rich resource for future research. ""People are dreaming of what might be contained in this water,"" says one researcher.

Paul and his companions found something similar in the spiritual realm when they came to Thessalonica with the gospel. Hidden under the spiritually frozen surface of this pagan port city, they found another reality--not pristine waters, but Jewish and Gentile hearts made ready to hear and respond to the message of salvation.

In these opening verses of 1 Thessalonians, Paul makes it clear that salvation is a work of God from beginning to end. The Thessalonians were chosen by God before the creation of the world (v. 4; cf. Eph. 1:4).

How did Paul know these believers were chosen of God for salvation? By their response to the gospel. Those who believed the message of Christ in Thessalonica received it for what it really is, "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

The Thessalonians demonstrated the reality of their faith. They embraced the gospel despite "severe suffering" (1 Thess. 1:6), indicating that the mob action of Acts 17 was not just a momentary persecution.

More than that, the Christians in this great city eagerly imitated Paul as he imitated Christ. They became evangelists themselves (see v. , with the result that other believers in the region imitated the Thessalonians in their faith, hope and love.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

There's nothing like a quiet walk to help put things in perspective. Why not do that this weekend? Here are two questions you might take with you to mull over as you walk.

First, is there an "apostle Paul" in your life--a mature believer whose godly example you can imitate? You may go on your walk alone, but the Christian life is not meant to be a solo act.

1 Thessalonians 1:6-10

Blessed are you when men hate you ... Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. - Luke 6:22-23

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to a recent TIME magazine poll, 17 percent of Christians surveyed aligned themselves with some type of a prosperity theology movement. Sixty-one percent believed that God wants people to be prosperous—31 percent agreed that if you give your money to God, He'll bless you with more money. In their September 10, 2006 article on Time.Com, David van Biema and Jeff Chu write that prosperity theology claims, "a God who loves you does not want you to be broke. Its signature verse could be John 10:10: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." Yet as Martin Luther once asked, "If Christ wore a crown of thorns, why should His followers expect only a crown of roses?"

Not every Christian experiences persecution, but the New Testament makes it clear that those who follow Jesus don't always experience material abundance. In fact, conversion may lead to physical loss, as with the Thessalonians. When Paul spoke of the Thessalonians being imitators of him, he likely meant both their faith and their being persecuted for that faith. Like Paul, the Thessalonians experienced persecution as a part of their walk with Christ from the beginning.

Despite suffering, the Thessalonians received the gospel with joy. Not only that, they became a model not just in Macedonia, where Thessalonica was located, but also in Achaia, the region to the south. It's easy to miss the fact that "you" in 1Th 1:7 is plural. Thus the entire Thessalonian church, not just individuals within that church, was an example. This is unusual in Paul's writing, which tells us quite a bit about this church!

This suffering church was also a model of proclaiming the gospel. The joyous effects of turning from idols to serve the living God and the glorious hope of Christ's return echoed forth from the Thessalonians like a trumpet ringing out (1Th 1:8)

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

1Th 1:9,10 present two keys of the Christian life. The first is to turn from idols. As fallen humans, we're drawn to various idols, those things we believe essential to our survival, such as financial success or career advancement. Even good things can become idols if they compete with our allegiance to God. The second is to hope in Christ's return. It's easy to hope in things that will eventually pass away and to lose sight of the only hope that never disappoints, Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:8 What A Ride!

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1

The word of the Lord has sounded forth . . . in every place. —1 Thessalonians 1:8

Francis Asbury rode 6,000 miles a year on horseback for nearly half a century. Despite ill health, he drove himself tirelessly. He sustained himself with venison jerky—a food that wouldn't spoil during his extended travels. Asbury is remembered for introducing the Methodist "circuit-riding preacher" as an effective way to capture the American frontier for Christ. Planting new churches in remote areas was central to his approach.

At the close of Asbury's ministry, he had recruited over 700 traveling preachers. In 1771, when Asbury arrived in the colonies, there were only about 600 Methodists in America. Forty-five years later, there were 200,000!

In many ways, Asbury's strategy for planting churches reflects the approach of the apostle Paul. To the church he had planted in Thessalonica, Paul wrote: "From you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place" (1 Thess. 1:8; see Acts 17:1-10).

The days of the "circuit-riding preacher" have come and gone. But each of us has a "frontier" where friends, relatives, and neighbors are our mission field. Can you think of someone today who needs to hear the good news?

Lord, lay some soul upon my heart, And love that soul through me; And may I nobly do my part To win that soul for Thee. —Tucker

Those who love Christ have a love for the lost.

By Dennis Fisher

1 Thessalonians 1:8 Building A Bridge

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. —1 Thessalonians 1:8

James Michener's Centennial is a fictional account of the history and settlement of the American West. Through the eyes of a French-Canadian trader named Pasquinel, Michener converges the stories of the Arapaho of the Great Plains and the European-based community of St. Louis. As this rugged adventurer moves between the growing clutter of the city and the wide-open spaces of the plains, he becomes a bridge between two drastically different worlds.

Followers of Christ also have the opportunity to build bridges between two very different worlds—those who know and follow Jesus and those who do not know Him. Early Christians in Thessalonica had been building bridges to their idol-worshiping culture, so Paul said of them, "For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place" (1 Thess. 1:8). The bridge they were building had two components: the "word of the Lord" and the example of their faith. It was clear to everyone that they had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (v.9).

As God declares Himself to those around us by His Word and through our lives, we can become a bridge to those who do not yet know the love of Christ.

Father, help us live in such a way that others
will want to know about Your Son. May we not
merely try to do what's "right" but instead
live as people forgiven and loved by You.

Live the gospel, and others will listen.

INSIGHT: In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says that the greatest things are faith, hope, and love (v.13). In today's passage, he commends the people of the church in Thessalonica for exhibiting these very traits. They work in faith and labor in love while hoping in Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1:3).

By Bill Crowder

1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dr. Paul Freed, founder of the missionary enterprise known as Trans World Radio, tells of an occasion when he was traveling in India. He and his party were in a remote area of the Indian bush, miles from any sign of "civilization." Stopping at a roadside stand, one member of Dr. Freed's party asked the proprietor if he had ever heard of Trans World Radio. The man smiled, reached down, and produced his transistor radio. He was a faithful listener!

Thanks to modern technology put to work by men such as Paul Freed, the gospel message can literally go around the world.

According to today's text, the Christians in Thessalonica had a similarly effective witness through their testimonies and their faithfulness to Christ.

True, the ""everywhere"" of the first century was a smaller world than today's ""global village."" But that does not dim the bright light of testimony those believers had for the Lord. Their reputation for godliness reached past Macedonia and Achaia, the two provinces of ancient Greece, and out into the Mediterranean world.

As we saw earlier, others marveled at the Thessalonians because of the manner in which they received Paul and the gospel. The fact that they ""turned to God from idols"" (v. 9) indicates that this church consisted largely of pagan Gentiles who had worshiped the gods of Greece and Rome. Such radical conversions would be quite noteworthy in the areas where Paul evangelized.

Notice the contrast he draws between serving God, which suggests activity, and waiting for the return of Christ, which suggests passivity. Paul commends the Thessalonians in both areas--but that doesn't mean that they were perfect, as we will learn later.

We cannot leave this section without pausing at 1Thes 1:10 to talk about what Paul elsewhere calls ""the blessed hope"" (Titus 2:13). This is the return of the Lord to deliver us from the judgment of God, which He will pour out on the unbelieving world.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Serving and waiting may seem contradictory, but for the Christian they are complementary concepts. Nothing motivates service for the Lord more than the hope of His return! We know that every believer is called to serve. And if your life is typical, there are plenty of places where faithful servants are needed. Has God brought a need to your attention? Determine today that you will follow through on whatever He may be calling you to do.

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 Do You Have Hope?

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven. —1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Several years ago, millionaire Eugene Lang was asked to speak to a class of sixth-graders from East Harlem, New York. What could he say to inspire these students, most of whom would drop out of school? Scrapping his notes, he decided to speak to them from his heart. "Stay in school," he admonished, "and I'll help pay the college tuitions for every one of you."

That was a turning point. For the first time in their lives, these students had hope. One said, "I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling." Nearly 90 percent of that class went on to graduate from high school.

People without hope are people without a future. But when hope is restored, life is restored. This is especially true for those who come to know Christ. He gives a sure basis for hope. He has promised to return to earth to take us to our eternal home (Jn. 14:3; 1 Th. 4:17). Till then, there is help through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Th. 1:5). The believer experiences a new kind of life now and anticipates its fulfillment when Jesus returns.

Is that hope alive in your heart? If not, admit that you are a sinner. Trust Christ as your Savior. And He'll give you a hope that makes life worth living.

A strong defense to guard the soul
Is ours from heaven above;
God fills our hearts with steadfast hope
And gives us faith and love. —DJD

If Christ lives in your heart, you have a living hope.

By Mart DeHaan

1 Thessalonians 2

1 Thessalonians 2:1-4

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the key forerunners of the Reformation was Bohemian [John Hus](#). He devoted himself to Scripture and taught that Christ, not the Pope, is Head of the Church. In 1414, Hus was called before the Council of Constance to defend his beliefs. He was convicted

of heresy and sentenced to be burnt at the stake unless he recanted. But Hus stood firm. On the day of his martyrdom he said: ""God is my witness that the evidence against me is false...In the truth of the gospel I have written, taught, and preached, today I will gladly die."" As the crackling flames consumed him, he joyfully sang a hymn.

Facing persecution and paying with his life, Hus championed the gospel and helped pave the way for the Reformation. Similarly, the apostle Paul also faced strong persecution in response to his teachings about Christ.

Today's text indicates that charges of doctrinal error and greed were being leveled against Paul by some in Thessalonica. This was to become a familiar story for the apostle. He would face similar accusations throughout his ministry.

The fact that 1 Thessalonians may be one of the earliest of Paul's letters (second, after Galatians) shows that opposition to his ministry existed from the start. So Paul takes twelve verses (1Thessalonians 2:1-12) to defend his conduct in Thessalonica.

One evidence that the charges against Paul were false was that his mission in Thessalonica was not a ""failure,"" meaning ""without results, futile."" (1Thes 2:1) God doesn't bless a sham!

Paul's references to the insults and injuries he and Silas suffered in Philippi (Acts 16:16-40), as well as to their harsh treatment in Thessalonica, is another strong answer to those questioning his motives.

The idea is this: If Paul were only preaching the gospel to attract a following or to line his pockets, why would he endure such suffering? People who are insincere or dishonest don't persevere when their schemes start to backfire. If Paul was doing ministry for money, he was going about it all wrong!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's a blessing to be able to say we have nothing to hide. ""Integrity"" is a political and corporate buzzword these days, much like ""family values."" You can't always be sure what people mean when they use the term.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-4

If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. - Galatians 1:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Since it was selected for Oprah's Book Club, New-Age spiritual leader Eckhart Tolle's book, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*, has sold over 3.5 million copies. When Tolle and Oprah launched a series of "webinars," over two million people participated. Tolle preaches a message that many people want to hear. According to Tolle, our basic problem is living out of our "false" self, which is ego-centered. Overcoming our false self involves discovering our "oneness" with God, who is everywhere and in everyone. Thus finding God and finding our true self is essentially the same thing, because God is in us, just as He is in everyone. It's easy to see why Tolle's message is so successful: the hard truth about sin and judgment is nowhere to be found.

The situation wasn't much different in Paul's day. There were plenty of traveling philosophers who went from town to town preaching whatever people wanted to hear and often making good money by doing so. Speakers were considered to be good if they could persuade, not necessarily if they told the truth. Such individuals often used clever-sounding arguments or trickery, but when their deception was discovered, they frequently had to leave town quickly. Apparently, some in Thessalonica were accusing Paul of doing the same thing. They may have noted that Paul had to flee Philippi just as he had left Thessalonica. This probably explains why Paul defends himself and his ministry at several points in 1 Thessalonians, including today's passage.

In this passage, Paul sets the record straight. Despite the insult of being beaten and imprisoned in Philippi—punishment that was illegal for Roman citizens—Paul didn't hold back from sharing the gospel in its entirety when he arrived in Thessalonica. As was always the case for Paul, his message was the true gospel from God and not any fancy, but deceptive, argument. Unlike those who spoke to earn approval or money, Paul spoke because he wanted to please God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Yesterday we noted that 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 contains foundational truths, such as the need to forsake idols and to hope for Christ's return. 1Th 1:10 also presents our rescue from the coming wrath of God: Jesus and His righteous response to sin. The glorious hope of the gospel can never be separated from this understanding of God's just judgment on sin. This message is never popular, neither today nor in Paul's day. But praise God for people like Paul who have been entrusted with the gospel and dare to proclaim it fully.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 Today in the Word

Most books about preaching focus on technique; the same is true of many evangelistic methods, which focus on outlines and

methods. Today's passage highlights another important element in the communication of the gospel by emphasizing the importance of the preacher's character. Those who tried to undermine the ministry of Paul and his companions in Philippi and in Thessalonica did so by attacking their character, not their theology. In Philippi, Paul and Silas were falsely accused of advocating lawless behavior (Acts 16:20–21). In Thessalonica, they accused Paul and his team of defying the government (Acts 17:6–7). Criticism of Paul continued even after he was forced to flee the city by night (Acts 17:10). Paul's enemies compared him to the many philosophers for hire who traveled from city to city and used their speaking ability to take advantage of gullible listeners.

Even though Paul did not stay long in Thessalonica, he left a lasting impression. To counter the false accusations of his enemies, Paul appealed to the first-hand experience of his audience, noting his motives as much as his methods. He was not motivated by greed, nor did he attempt to manipulate his audience by telling them what they wanted to hear. God's approval was more important to Paul than public acclaim. His ministry in Thessalonica was marked by loving concern and self-sacrifice. The Apostle was eager to share his life with them as a demonstration of the message of the gospel.

The validity of the gospel message is independent of the messenger. The gospel is still true even when the character of those who share it is false. Yet Paul's opponents knew that if they could persuade his audience to question the Apostle's character and his motives, they would doubt the message as well. If we want to be effective communicators of the good news, we need to do more than work on our technique. We need to pay attention to our motives and our character.

APPLY THE WORD - The three negatives in verses 5 and 6 provide a helpful starting point for distinguishing false teachers from true messengers of the gospel. Are they manipulating us by telling us what we want to hear? Do they seem to be more interested in personal gain than in godliness? Do they serve the church, or does the church serve them?

1 Thessalonians 2:5-8

In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. - 2 Peter 2:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Thanks to the second-century satirist Lucian we have a good picture of some of the traveling teachers who exploited unwary listeners during Paul's day. In *Alexander the False Prophet*, Lucian writes about one Alexander and his unscrupulous companion: "They readily discerned that human life is swayed by two great tyrants, hope and fear, and that a man who could use both of these to advantage would speedily enrich himself."

What a contrast to the apostle Paul! As we noted yesterday, more than likely Paul's opponents in Thessalonica tried to persuade the new Christians there that Paul was just like these charlatans—out for quick profit. In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12, Paul is probably confronting apparent rumors about the reasons he left town so quickly. It's likely that some were calling Paul a coward: he came, preached, won some converts, but skipped town at the first sign of trouble.

To counter these false charges, Paul reminds the Thessalonians about his actual conduct while being with them. Unlike unprincipled tricksters, Paul and his companions were not just pretending to preach good news while at the same time covering up impure motives. The greed mentioned in 1Th 2:5 may have been both monetary as well as seeking to make a name for oneself.

But even receiving money itself wasn't the issue, as Paul made clear in 1 Corinthians 9:14: "those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." We also know that Paul received at least one monetary gift from the Philippians while he was in Thessalonica. So, in spite of the fact that Paul could have expected the Thessalonians to have provided for him, he reminds the Thessalonians that he had actually provided for them, just as a mother who tenderly cares for her children. As Bible scholar Leon Morris writes, the actions of the apostle Paul and his companions "show that they had been more conscious of their responsibility than of their privileges."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Rather than impersonal duty, we see Paul's deep affection for his spiritual children. Rather than some memorized script, we find Paul sharing his very life. Hearts are won when we share our lives, not just the right answers or doctrine. This is a real challenge to the impersonal atmosphere present in many churches today, where individuals remain anonymous, never experiencing the tender love and intimate care that is pictured in this passage. What a model for ministry today's verses give us!

1 Thessalonians 2:5-9

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story is told that in 1943 the Duke of Windsor, former British monarch Edward VIII, and his wife spent a month at a luxurious resort hotel in Virginia. As they were preparing to leave, the bill was presented. The duke looked at it blankly and asked, "Now what

do I do with this?" Someone else had always taken care of such matters. He and the duchess left with the bill unpaid.

No one in Thessalonica could have accused Paul of skipping out on his tab. It's true that the apostle accepted gifts of support from some churches (see 2Cor 11:8-9; Phil. 4:14-18). He had a right to such support (1 Cor. 9:7-14). But in places where his motives for ministry were under fire, Paul worked hard at his tent making trade so as to remove any grounds for criticism (see 1Cor. 9:1-14; 2 Cor. 11:12).

Corinth was not the only place where Paul's motives were being attacked. Evidently the charge of greed was also leveled against him in Thessalonica (1Th 2:5). That must have hurt, because Paul's true motive could not have been more opposite.

Instead of taking from these believers, Paul had given of himself to them again and again. What metaphor could he use to explain the depth of his love for them? He turned to the most tender image on earth: a loving mother gently caring for her babies (1Th 2:7-8).

Here, as Dr. Charles Ryrie notes, is Paul's pastoral heart laid bare. From all indications, his ministry in Thessalonica had been marked by persecution, fierce opposition, and threats on his life. Yet, like a mother pouring out her love on her children, Paul gave spiritual birth to and then nurtured the Thessalonian believers. He appealed to their memory of his selfless service, but in the end he was content to leave his case with God (1Th 2:5, 9-10).

1 Thessalonians 2:9-12

Bible colleges like Moody Bible Institute often distinguish themselves from Christian colleges that focus on the liberal arts by emphasizing that their mission is to train students for "vocational" ministry or "full-time Christian service." This does not mean that paid professionals are the only people doing ministry in the church or that most of the church serves Christ on a part-time basis. Instead, it is a helpful reminder that ministry is work.

For Paul serving the Lord involved "toil and hardship" (v. 9). This was true in two ways: in addition to the work of ministry, Paul also worked to support himself "in order not to be a burden to anyone." Paul was a tentmaker, an occupation he shared with his colleagues Aquila and Priscilla (see Acts 18:2). He came from a region that was famous for producing high quality materials for making tents and probably learned his craft from his father. Tentmaking was a form of manual labor that required the Apostle to make a living by working hard with his hands (1 Cor. 4:12). Some criticized Paul for this practice (1 Cor. 9:3-7; 2 Cor. 11:7). But in Paul's eyes, the work of ministry and the labor of tentmaking were two sides of the same effort devoted to Christ.

Paul's motivation for working night and day was love. Indeed, love shaped all his behavior toward the Thessalonians. Paul cared for the Thessalonians the way a father cares for his children. Normally the parents provide for the needs of their children, not the other way around (cf. 2 Cor. 12:14). Although Paul had a right to expect support from those to whom he ministered, he preferred to provide for those needs by plying a trade. This served two purposes. It guaranteed that Paul would not be a financial burden to the Thessalonians. It also provided an example of the spiritual value of ordinary work in a cultural context where many thought that work was beneath them (2 Thess. 3:9).

APPLY THE WORD We sometimes separate our lives into sacred and secular categories. Some imply that only the work that's done inside the church really matters; what happens outside of "ministry" is irrelevant or meaningless. How would it change the way you approach your job to see it as an exercise in devotion to God? How does it enable you to provide for others and serve Him more effectively?

1 Thessalonians 2:9-12

In Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. - 1 Corinthians 4:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 2004, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services published a report entitled "Fathers and Father-Figures: Their Important Role in Children's Social and Emotional Development." The authors note, "Evidence shows that the quality of interactions in a father-child relationship positively impacts the cognitive, social and moral development of young children." They go on to state that positive play time between a father and child may also be linked with that child's ability to interact well with other children.

Yesterday we saw that Paul used the image of a caring mother to describe his relationship with the Thessalonians. In today's passage he uses the image of a father to develop this picture further. Recall from our study yesterday that, as an apostle, Paul could have legitimately asked the Thessalonian church to provide for his daily needs while in their midst. Instead, in today's passage, we find that Paul was working, most likely as a tentmaker, throughout the day and ministering to the new converts well into the night. In addition to indicating his love for the Thessalonian church, this also shows the depth of his commitment to preach the gospel.

Once again, we see that Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his blameless conduct throughout his stay there; most likely his

opponents were spreading rumors of some type of improper conduct on the part of Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Far from anything objectionable, however, Paul's actions were pure in God's sight, without any injustice, and free from any possible impropriety. The three descriptions that Paul uses of his conduct leave no basis for any accusation that might have been brought against him.

Yet deeper than faultless actions was Paul's commitment to interact with the Thessalonians as a father would with his own children. Here we find a wonderful glimpse into God's intentions for fathers: encouraging when a child is discouraged, comforting when a child is upset, and urging a child toward maturity.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One theme that will recur in this month's study is godly living in light of the end times. In today's passage, Paul urges believers to live lives worthy of their destination, the glorious kingdom of God. Our transformed lives confirm that His kingdom is already victorious because of Jesus' incarnation, resurrection, and ascension. Yet we're also urged to live our lives in accordance with our future participation in the kingdom, when God's rule is finally established and His glory is fully revealed throughout all the earth.

1 Thessalonians 2:11 2 Corinthians 12:11-21

We dealt with each of you as a father. - 1 Thessalonians 2:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Japanese culture values politeness and formality. This is especially true when it comes to giving gifts. Once a gift is received, it's expected that a gift will be given in return. This gift must be chosen carefully. A gift is an expression of status, so an inappropriate gift could bring shame upon an individual. Giving the same gift to different individuals could be insulting.

Every culture has its own set of rules for proper behavior. As we've noted before, patron-client relationships in Paul's day were prevalent. In general, these formal rules would have been inappropriate in a parent-child relationship. Parents generally saw themselves as protectors who helped their children succeed in life. We can imagine the pain Paul felt when his Corinthian "children" treated him according to formal patronage rules.

In the first part of today's passage, Paul concluded his "boasting" by stressing that the true marks of an apostle had been repeatedly manifest to the Corinthians. They had seen all that they needed to know that Paul, not the super-apostles, was the real thing.

Just a few remaining issues needed to be cleared up before Paul could undertake another visit to Corinth. First, Paul underscored that the basis of their relationship was family, not patrons or clients. Love and integrity, not obligation and debt, drove Paul. The same was true for Titus and the other brothers sent by Paul.

Second, Paul clarified that his words shouldn't be construed as a defense. This probably surprised the Corinthians! But a defense would have given credibility to their charges and implied that Paul had been wrong. Paul's concern was for the gospel. To refute false charges was to prevent false apostles from gaining a foothold.

Third, Paul turned the tables by suggesting a few charges of his own. He worried that the Corinthians' past ungodliness hadn't been fully renounced. If so, he would have been humiliated for having labored in vain.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Christians aren't expected to be perfect, and both confession and repentance are important parts of the Christian life. At the same time, expecting godliness within a Christian community is entirely appropriate. Given that the Corinthians weren't new believers, Paul was right to expect repentance, sexual purity, and spiritual maturity from those who had "sinned earlier." The same is true for believers today. True spiritual maturity is reflected in true godliness.

1 Thessalonians 2:10-12

TODAY IN THE WORD

In contemporary American society, "fatherhood" is a hot topic. Society suddenly seems to have given today's men "permission" to be good fathers, and legions of dads are taking society up on the offer. The National Fatherhood Institute, which is at the forefront of this encouraging movement, offers a number of suggestions for how men can improve their fathering skills. Among them:

- Be a teacher
- Be a role model
- Earn the right to be heard

- Discipline with a gentle spirit
- Show affection
- Realize a father's job is never done

Lay these suggestions alongside today's text, and you'll see why Paul likened his ministry among the Thessalonians to that of a father. He did all of the things listed above for these new believers--and much more!

For instance, Paul's reference to working hard night and day so as not to be a burden on his spiritual children (v. 9) reminds us of a father's responsibility toward his children. Although Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians was not in providing their material needs, he still worked among them with a fatherly diligence. His example will take on additional importance as we continue our study of this letter, because the church in Thessalonica was plagued by some who decided either that work was beneath them or that it was for ""the other guy."" Paul prescribed some strong fatherly medicine for those lazy Christians!

Like a good father, Paul not only taught the Thessalonians the truth they needed for life. He lived it out among them. Once again, he refers to the fact that his blameless behavior during his time in Thessalonica was well known (1Thes 2:10). (Notice how often the phrase ""you know"" occurs in these chapters.)

Commenting on 1Thes 2:10, Dr. John Stott points out that ""holy"" has to do with our devotion and piety before God; ""righteous"" can refer to our relations with those around us; and ""blameless"" generally refers to our public reputation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY -Those three areas of life--our walk with God, our relationship to other believers, and our reputation in the world--are three important areas of our lives and witness today. If you feel as though you often fail to measure up in one area or another, join the club! All of us stumble and fall on occasion, but the good news is that we don't have to stay down. Christ provides all we need for daily cleansing.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 Elephants hear far better than humans, but not only because of their ears. They have special receptors in their trunk and in their feet that allow them to pick up low-frequency vibrations. This gives them an uncanny ability to locate rain, for instance. Hearing is also an important aspect of Christian life. In his book *The Divine Voice*, author Stephen Webb observes that Christianity has an "oral" quality. "By speaking to us, God grants us the ability to listen, and when we are stirred by God's voice we rise above the animal state and begin to speak ourselves."

Paul was grateful to God for granting the Thessalonians discernment to recognize that his teaching was "not the word of men" (v. 13). This ability to "hear" Paul's message had two important dimensions. First, it involved an acknowledgement of its authority. The Thessalonian believers recognized that God was the ultimate source of the things that Paul preached to them. Second, they recognized its power. This was the word which is "at work" in all who believe. Words have divine power when God is their author.

Paul used the language of tradition when he described his message as something that the Thessalonians had "received." The Greek word used here meant something that was "handed down." Paul's message did not originate with him. He learned it from Christ. Likewise, the Thessalonian believers were not alone in either their hearing or in their suffering for that message. By receiving Paul's gospel as the word of God they became "imitators of God's churches in Judea" (v. 14).

The opposition described in verses 15 and 16 is a reminder that God's Word does not work like a magic spell. Not everyone who hears takes it to heart. Hearing must be combined with faith before it can have its full effect. These verses also include a sober reminder that God will hold us accountable for what we hear. Those who reject God's message will be judged.

APPLY THE WORD

Before the printing press, most people encountered God's Word through hearing. Those who first received this letter probably heard it read when the church gathered for worship. Listening to Scripture can provide insights that we might miss when we are reading for ourselves. If you have access to an audio Bible, take some time to listen to Paul's letters to the Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

TODAY IN THE WORD

As most of us remember, a pipe bomb exploded during this past summer's Olympics, killing or injuring many. As emergency vehicles were taking away the injured and police were searching Atlanta's Centennial Park for more bombs, people returned to the park entrance.

What did they want? Amazingly, they demanded to be let in to continue the party. Later that day, fans lined up for Olympic tickets and the streets and shops were filled with people again.

Why this ""business-as-usual"" reaction? Unfortunately, pain and suffering are nothing new. We live in a fallen world in which these are daily realities. At any moment, they can break in on our lives. We have grown accustomed to tragedy.

Similarly, persecution was an accepted fact of life for the church at Thessalonica. We know from Acts 17 that Paul and his companions suffered at the hands of hostile unbelievers during their mission in the city. Earlier in this letter, the apostle made reference to the severe suffering inflicted on the church (1Th 1:6).

No one enjoys suffering. Our humanity tells us to flee the cause in order to relieve the pain. Since the Thessalonians were as human as anyone, Paul was concerned lest their sufferings cause them to pull back from their devotion to Christ. He was doubly concerned because he had been forced to leave them abruptly (see 2:17).

How much were the Thessalonians suffering? As much as Jewish believers such as Paul suffered at the hands of unbelieving Jews in Judea (vv. 14-15). There was no doubt about the severity of that suffering! Jesus Himself wept over Jerusalem, ""you who kill the prophets"" (Matt. 23:37).

Wasn't a Gentile city such as Thessalonica worlds apart from Judea geographically and culturally? Yes, but the fact that Paul's Jewish persecutors tried to keep him from preaching the gospel to the Gentiles brought those two worlds together. Whether Jew or Gentile, Christian believers shared the experience of suffering for their faith.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

On the subject of suffering for Christ, we Westerners often feel a twinge of guilt--we live comfortably while other Christians around the world are suffering. Both Peter and Paul tell us to expect persecution because we belong to Christ (2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 4:12), but we are not told to go looking for it. Instead, our prayer should be that we will be faithful to Christ whatever the consequences.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! - Matthew 23:32

TODAY IN THE WORD

In central Asian countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, new Christians are considered traitors both to native religious traditions and to their own families. Many new converts are isolated or beaten to "bring them back to their senses." Yet remarkably, Christianity is growing here. What the Thessalonian church experienced from non-believing neighbors has been repeated worldwide for the past two thousand years. In fact, what the Thessalonians endured had already been experienced by the Judean churches, as Paul notes in our passage.

Paul likely linked the experiences of the Thessalonian church with Jewish believers in Judea to show these Gentile converts that those who received the gospel at the very beginning were also persecuted. In other words, the Thessalonians hadn't done something wrong, rather persecution often went hand-in-hand with the gospel.

The mention of the Jews in today's passage is troublesome for some who may think it suggests anti-Semitic sentiments on the part of Paul or the early church. Recall, however, that Paul, a Jew, never opposed the Jews as an entire group simply because they were Jewish, but only those Jews who rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah. Moreover, not all Jews opposed the gospel, as Paul's own conversion makes clear. Also recall from our study on Acts (see September 2007), that Paul's strategy was always to minister first in local synagogues until he was forced to leave, just as he had done in Thessalonica.

In addition to rejecting God's Messiah, Jews who opposed the gospel made matters worse by seeking to prevent evangelism among Gentiles. As Bible scholar R. C. H. Lenski writes, "The worst feature of unbelief is not its own damnation, but its effort to frustrate the salvation of others." This is the idea behind heaping up their sins and God's wrath coming upon these Jews (1Th 2:16). Yet Romans 9:1-11:33 teaches that Israel's rejection of God's plan leads to the gospel coming to the Gentiles and that God's promises for Israel have not been voided in the process.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's passage focuses on God's unique purposes for Israel. It also offers encouragement in a more general way that persecutors of the gospel aren't outside the scope of God's sovereign purposes. The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church began in 1996 and has grown to become one of the largest days of prayer. As Christians pray for their persecuted brothers and sisters, it's also important to pray for those who persecute. To learn more, you can visit www.persecutedchurch.org.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

Author J. M. Barrie observed, "The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another; and his

humblest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it.”

Planning is good, but even good plans often unfold in unexpected ways. This was true for the apostle Paul, who had a strong desire to see the Thessalonians again. The attachment Paul felt for this church, as well as his distress over being “separated” from them, is evident in the language he uses in verse 17 through 20. He does not provide specific details about the circumstances that kept him from returning to Thessalonica, but he does make it clear that Satan hindered his plans.

Good plans sometimes go unfulfilled because Satan places obstacles in our way. Prayer that seeks God’s will and strength should be a part of our planning, preparation, and implementation. Satan may be able to hinder our plans, but he cannot stop God from accomplishing His purposes.

The emphasis on Paul’s strong desire to see the Thessalonians, combined with his explanation for not following through on this plan, could suggest that the Apostle’s enemies used this absence against him. They may have pointed to Paul’s failure to return as proof of his insincerity. Perhaps they suggested that Paul had stirred up trouble in Thessalonica only to leave these new Christians to face the consequences alone. Satan’s interference did not shake Paul’s confidence in the ultimate outcome of his ministry. He was fully assured that God’s gracious work in the Thessalonians would provide him with an occasion to rejoice at Christ’s return.

In the midst of interrupted plans and unfulfilled desires, the apostle Paul was able to maintain a kind of double vision. He discerned the spiritual forces at work in the present while keeping his eye on the final outcome when Jesus returns in glory.

APPLY THE WORD - How are your plans coming along? You may not be able to see the spiritual forces that affect them as clearly as Paul did, but you can be sure that God is greater than the obstacles before you. Ask God to make his will clear and thwart Satan’s efforts to derail you. As we seek to fulfill our plans, God often changes the path—but the ultimate destination is sure.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Isaac Watts is known today for his glorious hymns that have blessed the church for well over two hundred years. But Watts was also a faithful pastor who served in the same church for his entire ministry.

A sickly man, Watts would often retire to bed to recuperate after preaching a sermon. But his love for his people remained strong despite his weak health. He once wrote of his congregation: “There is no place, no company, nor employment under heaven, that can give me such delight, as when I stand ministering holy things in the midst of you.”

As a messenger of the gospel with the heart of a pastor, Paul could have signed his name to a similar statement. Although his ministry was itinerant instead of settled, Paul loved the people under his charge intensely.

Today’s verse reminds us that he felt that way about the church at Philippi. And we know that he also loved the Thessalonians with deep, parental affection. In fact, the verb translated “torn away” (1Thes 2:17) means “to be orphaned.”

Verse 17 begins a different line of thought which carries through to the end of chapter 3. The background, though, is the same as that in the previous section: Paul’s defense against those who accused him of wrong motives. Having defended his visit to Thessalonica, Paul now defends his sudden departure and the fact that he had not been able to return.

Some apparently were accusing him of not caring enough to come back, or of being afraid to do so. But Paul knew better. His desire to return was intense, but his path was being blocked by Satan (v. 18). One possibility is that when city officials made Jason and other believers post bond for harboring Paul (Acts 17:9), they legally banned Paul from returning.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Someone has said that the one thing better than going to heaven yourself is taking other people with you.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. - 2 Corinthians 3:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

If there’s one object that uniquely identifies Queen Elizabeth II, it’s her stunning crown. Originally created for George IV, this crown, known as the Diamond Diadem, is set with 1,333 diamonds, including a four-carat pale yellow stone in the front. Around its base are 169 pearls. Depictions of Queen Elizabeth II wearing this crown are found on British stamps.

It’s easy to see why brilliant royal crowns such as this are associated with glory and honor. Yet, in today’s passage, Paul speaks of a much different crown, one that will never be displayed in a museum or worn in coronation ceremony, but one that is far more

glorious and brilliant. Employing yet another metaphor to describe his relationship with the Thessalonians, Paul likens their relationship with Jesus to a crown that will bring future glory in the presence of Christ's return.

The Greek word used for crown here depicts the crowns given in athletic competitions, such as laurel wreaths. Unlike those fading crowns, however, the true reward that awaits believers comes from investing in the lives of others. Paul expresses this same idea in today's verse from 2 Corinthians; it's not letters of commendation based on education or business accomplishments, but rather the lives of individuals whom we've impacted for Christ Jesus, that will count in the end. This isn't boasting, but rather the deep joy of a life spent serving the Lord, the true impact of which is only visible when He returns in glory.

Seeing how greatly Paul loved these believers helps to understand the great pain that he must have felt when he was forced to leave them. Notice the strong image of being torn away that he uses in 1Thes 2:17. The switch from the first person plural ("we") to singular ("I") further underscores the pain that Paul felt. These verses also show that the real force behind opposition to the gospel is not human persecutors, but rather Satan himself.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We may never have a royal crown, but we might long for other crowns, such as career advancement, a big house, social status, or athletic glory. But today's passage presents a far more precious crown. The beauty of this crown is its dependence upon the Lord. Often we have no idea how we're being used by Him in others' lives. What freedom this gives us! We're free to minister, knowing that pouring ourselves into others' lives will bring Him glory when He returns.

1 Thessalonians 2:19 Philippians 1:23-26

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? - 1 Thessalonians 2:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned near the end of World War II at the Nazi concentration camp in Buchenwald. When his death sentence was decreed in Berlin, he was transferred to the extermination camp at Flossenbürg on April 3, 1945.

On April 8, the first Sunday after Easter, Bonhoeffer led his fellow prisoners in a prayer service and spoke from Isaiah 53:5, on the truth that "by His wounds we are healed." Two Gestapo officers interrupted the meeting and ordered him to come with them. He bid the others farewell, saying, "This is the end--for me, the beginning of life." The next morning he was hanged. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood martyrdom and death in the same way as the apostle Paul. To die is to be with Christ!

We broke off yesterday in the middle of Paul's internal debate. Should he have desired martyrdom and being with Christ, or release from prison and continued service for God? The strong emotions this question generated in Paul's mind reveal clearly that he loved Christ above all else!

This passage also answers the question of what happens to believers after death. Some people believe in purgatory, while others think we will "sleep" until Christ returns. But as we see here, believers who die are immediately with Christ (Php 1:23).

In today's reading we find the resolution to Paul's problem. He was convinced that he would be freed for further ministry (Php 1:24-25). This was neither a choice on Paul's part nor egotism of the apostle, but a conviction from God that this was what would happen. How strong was this conviction? The word for "convinced" is the same as in verse six--God has guaranteed it!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

"Hiding" God's Word in your heart is an excellent faith-builder. We at Today in the Word often recommend the discipline of Scripture memory as a helpful tool in daily Christian living.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. - 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Archaeologists in Syria recently unearthed what is believed to be one of the largest ancient Christian churches ever discovered there. At a dig in Palmyra, northeast of Damascus, they found the remains of a church building dating back 1,500 years. It included a small amphitheater and courtyard that may have been used for baptisms and other ceremonies. "Christianity came to Palmyra in the year 312, at a time when Christians had begun to build churches," a local museum director told the press. "And this one is huge

—the biggest ever found in Syria.”

As exciting as this piece of history is, it’s important to remember that the “church” is not a building. It’s people. In today’s reading, the Thessalonian church was a source of joy for the apostle Paul (1Th 2:19-20; 3:9; cf. Phil. 4:1). He had planted the church, and the believers there represented the fruit of his ministry (Acts 17:1-9). He was running his race in such a way as to win, and in a sense they were his victory “crown”—not for an ego trip but for one day glorying in the presence of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24-27). Their Christian witness was his proof to present that he was a faithful and obedient servant, and knowing that brought joy and gladness to his heart.

Paul’s joy meant that he longed for them and hoped to visit them. There was an emotional warmth to their relationship. He also sent Timothy to check on their spiritual condition. He was to find out how they were doing and to encourage them, then bring news back to Paul. When Paul learned of their spiritual growth, he said, “Now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord” (3:8). He also prayed for them to grow in faith, love, and holiness (1Th 3:11-13). His joy in them focused not on what is temporal, such as trials and persecution, but on what is eternal.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul had a close and joy-filled relationship with the churches he planted. He took a strong personal interest in their spiritual well being and growth in the Lord. Other relationships are also often characterized by this kind of mentoring care and joy, including teachers and students, pastors and congregations, and parents and children. When we have the privilege of being involved in one or more such relationships, we would do well to invest in them as part of God’s gift of joy to us.

1 Thessalonians 3

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

TODAY IN THE WORD

In occupied nations such as Poland, a Nazi intimidation tactic was to cut off all communication between towns and villages. One Holocaust survivor, who was a Polish teenager when the Nazis occupied his town, says: “You can’t imagine how isolated and desperate we felt. There were no newspapers or radio broadcasts. We had no idea what was happening in villages a few miles away. So when the Nazis took my parents and other adults away and told them they were going out to the fields to help in the harvest, we did not know different--until they did not come back.”

Isolation often breeds desperation, especially when we are cut off from those we love. Judging by today’s text, Paul was desperate to know how his converts in Thessalonica were doing. Since he was not able to visit them, he sent Timothy, even though for Paul this decision meant being alone.

Paul went from Thessalonica to Athens, where his escorts left him (Acts 17:15). Silas and Timothy joined him later, but he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on the church while he went on to Corinth (Acts 18:1). Timothy and Paul were reunited in Corinth, where Paul wrote this letter.

Why was Paul concerned about the Thessalonians? They were being persecuted for their faith, and the fire was getting hot (1Th 3:3-5). Paul knew what could happen to young converts living under such conditions. The human temptation would be to seek escape from the pressure of persecution, to back off from their commitment to Christ.

Added to this were the temptations Paul knew Satan would bring that could trip up the Thessalonians. The possibility that these pressures might cause the believers there to cave in weighed heavily on Paul’s spirit. Not knowing what was happening in Thessalonica made the burden even heavier.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Despite clear teaching about the inevitability of trials for the Christian, many of us still react to tough times as if God had either forgotten about us or were punishing us.

1 Thessalonians 3:1–8 PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL

For we are God’s co-workers; you are God’s field, God’s building. 1 Corinthians 3:9

A humorous poster sold by Despair, Inc. mimics the motivational art displayed in the workplace. It shows a runner dropping the baton in a relay race and describes the reality of teamwork this way: “Ensuring that your hard work can always be ruined by someone else’s incompetence.” We chuckle (and maybe nod in recognition!) at this description, but the fact is that teams remain an

important feature of the church's ministry.

Paul often relied on the help of others. Timothy was of particular value to his ministry. He described Timothy to the Philippian church in these words: "I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare" (Phil. 2:20). Although Timothy was Paul's protégé, today's passage describes him as a peer. Paul calls him "our brother" and a "co-worker in God's service" (this phrase could also be translated "God's fellow worker"). Perhaps this was meant to further reassure the Thessalonians of Paul's continuing interest in them. Timothy was not the second-string team. He was Paul's most trusted associate.

Timothy's mission in Thessalonica was threefold. First, he was sent to continue the work Paul had begun by building them up in the faith. Second, Timothy was sent to reassure the Thessalonian believers, "so that no one would be unsettled by these trials" (v. 3). Were these Paul's trials? Or was he afraid that in his absence the Thessalonians would question the validity of the gospel because of the suffering it had brought upon them? Paul's language is inclusive and probably has both in view. Timothy was sent to reassure these young believers that their suffering did not fall outside the scope of God's plan for them.

The third element of Timothy's mission was to reassure Paul. Timothy's first-hand account of their continued faith and affection was a source of encouragement to Paul in the midst of distress and persecution (v. 8). Timothy's ministry to the Thessalonians was an extension of Paul's, but it was also a ministry to Paul.

APPLY THE WORD - Is there someone whose ministry has helped you grow in your faith? Perhaps it is a favorite teacher or Sunday school leader. It may be your pastor. When was the last time you let them know how God has used them in your life? Write a letter, note, or email of encouragement to someone today to let them know that their ministry has not been in vain.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. - 2 Timothy 3:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

In today's age of instant communication, it's easy to forget the anxiety that comes from not being able to communicate with someone or even to know his or her whereabouts. But if you've ever had a child or close friend travel to a very isolated area, then you might know how hard this can be. The understandable anxiety that accompanies not knowing another's circumstances explains Paul's state of mind in today's passage.

Recall that Paul, Silas, and Timothy had to leave Thessalonica hastily. From there, they traveled to Berea where a large number of Jews put their faith in Jesus. But the Jews who had caused problems in Thessalonica came to Berea and created problems there as well. Consequently, Paul had to flee again, this time to Athens, over 200 miles to the south. Eventually, Paul left Athens for Corinth. According to Acts 18:5, Timothy and Silas finally met with Paul in Corinth. As we noted earlier, it is likely that Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians from this city.

Unable to bear the uncertainty of not knowing how the young Thessalonian church was doing, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (1Th 3:2). The depth of Paul's love for this church is all the more remarkable when we remember that his stay with them was relatively short. Paul's actions also show his high regard for Timothy, whom he entrusted with this important mission. Apparently Timothy hadn't been associated with the earlier uprising and was free to travel back to Thessalonica.

Paul's ministry of strengthening and encouraging the Thessalonians implies that the Jewish opponents were likely trying to persuade these young believers to abandon Christianity and to convert to Judaism. Some may have been tempted by this possibility as a means of avoiding persecution. Once again, however, we see that the real entity behind such temptation is not human, but Satan, whom Paul describes here as "**the tempter**" (1Thes 3:5).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul's concern for the Thessalonians underscores the dangers that believers face. The gospel often comes with persecution and temptations to abandon the faith, even for mature Christians. Perhaps you've walked with the Lord for some time, but feel tempted to pull back in your Christian walk. All believers need strengthening and encouragement. This might be a good time to join a Bible study or find a prayer group. Strong fellowship is a good defense against temptation.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-7; 2 Corinthians 11:23-29

I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. - 2 Corinthians 11:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

For the past year, an increasing number of foreign missionaries and pastors have been forced to leave Jordan, often falsely

accused of engaging in illegal activities. Finnish pastor Hannu Lahtien, deported in December 2007, said this about Jordanian officials: "They said that I am a threat to Jordanian security and I am making the society unstable." Those forced to leave often anxiously await news about the churches and fellowships they've left behind.

These Christians leaders' anxiety gives some insight into what Paul must have felt as he waited for news about the Thessalonians. Paul's intense feeling of joy and relief when he received the good report from Timothy is revealed in his word choice. In verse 6, talking about Timothy's "good news," he used the same verb that is normally connected with the good news of the gospel. In a sense this report was like the gospel because it attested to the life-changing power of Jesus Christ not only to bring people to saving faith but also to preserve them in that faith.

In addition to their steadfast confidence in Christ, the Thessalonians also longed to be with Paul. The depth of Paul's longing was reciprocated by the Thessalonians. Timothy's report certainly was "good news" indeed.

It's not exactly clear what type of distress is meant in verse 7. Possibly Paul was referring back to what had happened in Philippi, Thessalonica, or Berea. When Paul finally arrived in Corinth (where he received Timothy's report), he was beat down: "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). Rather than any specific event, however, it's likely that Paul had in mind his anxiety that the Thessalonians had succumbed to the tempter (1Th 3:5).

Second Corinthians 11 lists the many physical hardships Paul endured for the gospel. Remarkably, his greatest burden was his "concern for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28). What a great testimony about Paul's deep burden for the churches that he had planted!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's passages show what brought Paul joy and what kept him awake at night. In both cases, the physical circumstances of his life—whether deprivation or abundance—were secondary. What impacted him most was the spiritual condition of those he loved. The good report about the Thessalonians brought him intense joy; fear of possible spiritual failure distressed him greatly. None of us is called to the same ministry as Paul, but his concern for people, and not his circumstances, is an example for all of us.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

TODAY IN THE WORD

The success of the U.S. women's gymnastics team in the Olympics brought smiles to the faces of several publishers. While the Games were still in progress, a book about 14-year-old gymnast Dominique Moceanu vaulted onto two major bestseller lists. Even a book exposing the ""making and breaking"" of young gymnasts and figure skaters was in huge demand in bookstores last summer.

The ""performance"" of the Thessalonian church put a similar smile on the face of the apostle Paul. Of course, what was at stake was not gold medals, the world's applause, or book contracts. Instead, it was the survival and spiritual success of a fledgling body of believers living in the midst of a pagan city.

When Timothy was reunited with Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5), his report was so encouraging that Paul seems to have sat down immediately to write this letter (1 Thess. 3:6). How good was the good news? Speaking of Timothy's report, Paul actually applied the verb that normally means ""to preach the gospel""!

The encouraging word concerning the Thessalonians was twofold. First, those believers were standing firm in their faith and love, even though they needed additional teaching (vv. 6, 10). In light of Paul's earlier fears, this was outstanding news!

The second part of Timothy's good report was that the Thessalonians still had strong affection for Paul. Given Paul's critics there and the charge that he had come only for personal glory and gain, this was also welcome news.

All of this strengthened and encouraged Paul in his own sufferings in Corinth. He was enduring physical distress and spiritual persecution (v. 7), a potent one-two punch designed to knock him out of the battle.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul wasn't the only one smiling when he heard of the Thessalonians' steadfastness. As we act in ways that please Him, we as God's people can also enjoy His smile.

Do you want the smile of God's pleasure on your life today? The Lord's day is the perfect time for us to talk about this, because we can please Him by the gifts and sacrifices we bring Him when we come together for worship.

1 Thessalonians 3:8-10

I have no greater joy that to hear that my children are walking in the truth. - 3 John 4

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1982, the champagne company Mot & Chandon began monitoring the price changes of luxury goods and services in New York City with the Mot Luxury Index, or what the company preferred to call “the cost of “really” living.” The Index has since expanded to track luxury items worldwide. In 2006, one of the largest consumers of high-end luxury goods was China, where “really” living has meant a 50 percent increase in annual sales for LVMH Mo Hennessy—Louis Vuitton, the world’s largest producer of luxury goods.

For many people, the idea of “really” living involves fabulous wealth and unlimited consumption of luxury items. “Living” is often associated with what we can consume or show off to others; “real living” is seldom associated with the impact that we can have on others’ spiritual maturity. Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians powerfully challenges these popular ideas by showing that real living is not directed toward ourselves and what stuff we can have but is focused on others.

It’s clear that Paul poured out his life for the gospel. The good report concerning the Thessalonians was a testimony to his hard work and perseverance. Yet when he heard the good news about their spiritual maturity, his gratitude was immediately directed toward God. Unlike young children who need to be prodded to say thank you when they receive a gift, Paul’s immediate response to this good report was gratitude to God. In 1Th 3:9, he uses a rhetorical question to underscore the depth of his thanksgiving.

It would have been easy to be content with the Thessalonians’ current state, but Paul wanted them to press on even further. The expression “night and day” pictures Paul’s earnestness in this regard (v. 10). The idea of something lacking in the Thessalonians’ faith doesn’t mean that they were defective in some way, but rather that they were spiritually young and immature. Paul knew that their conversion and initial growth was just the beginning. Now he longed for increasing maturity.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul’s priorities were always focused on people, not things. Yet for many of us, it’s easy to let the things crowd out the people. Today, prayerfully consider your priorities. Ask the Spirit for eyes to see any misplaced priorities and for the desire to focus on what really matters most—the lives that the Lord has entrusted to you. The world’s greatest luxury items can never compare with the riches of being used by the Lord to increase the spiritual maturity of other believers.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

No one has ever seen God: but if we love one another ... his love is made complete in us. - 1 John 4:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

When pastor Scott Wright first met his future wife, he wasn’t a Christian. No doubt he noticed her beautiful eyes and winsome smile, but what he recalls most from that time was how she and her friends loved each other. They really enjoyed being together. Prior to meeting his wife, Scott thought he knew how to have fun—parties, baseball games, late nights drinking. But the love and joy he encountered in this new group wasn’t like anything that he’d seen before. Eventually this is what drew Scott to Christ.

The popular chorus “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love” captures Scott’s experience. Millions of people like him have been “loved” into the kingdom. Given the power of Christian love, it’s no wonder Paul prayed that the Thessalonians’ love would increase.

Recall from yesterday Paul’s praise to God for the good report about the Thessalonians. The benediction recorded in today’s passage flows naturally from that gratitude. Notice first the affirmation of Christ’s deity. Many scholars believe that 1 Thessalonians is one of Paul’s earliest letters, which counters the popular idea that the very early church didn’t affirm that Jesus was God.

From this, Paul turns to love. Notice that Paul prays that the Thessalonians would not only love each other, but also love everyone else. It’s easy to love those within your own circle, but love extended to outsiders is powerful. For the Thessalonians this included loving their persecutors. Finally Paul prays that the Thessalonians would be strengthened to be holy and blameless in God’s presence. Here holiness indicates being set apart for God, and blameless is a legal term that describes a believer’s standing before God. Here we see another link between godly living now and Christ’s future return.

Today’s prayer anticipates the rest of the letter, where holiness (1Th 4:1-8), love (1Th 4:9-12), and Christ’s return (1Th 4:13-5:11) will be discussed further.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today’s prayer can be prayed for all believers everywhere because love and holiness should always be increasing in every believer’s life. The connection between love and holiness can be easily overlooked, but as Bible scholar D. Edmund Hiebert aptly notes, “An unloving man cannot be a holy man.” Notice also that the process of standing blameless at Christ’s return begins now. Consider adopting this wonderful prayer for yourself and other believers in your life, such as members of a Bible study group or

choir.

1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 PRAYER AND HOPE

Most of us feel ambivalent about our prayer life. We believe in the importance of prayer, but we do not think that we pray well. Like the disciples who asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, we know there is room for improvement. Prayer is mysterious—but it is not rocket science. In today's passage the apostle Paul describes the two foundations of the believer's prayer life: thanksgiving and request.

One dimension of prayer, described in verse 8, is thanksgiving. Prayer provides us with an opportunity to express our gratitude to God. This is Paul's third expression of thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians (see 1:2; 2:13). Paul's inability to fully express his gratitude underscores the inexhaustible nature of God's goodness. His gifts always outstrip our gratitude.

This prayer of thanksgiving also reveals something about the source of spiritual growth. By giving thanks, Paul acknowledges that their continuance in faith is the result of something God has done.

The Thessalonians don't deserve the credit and neither does Paul. He and Timothy were instrumental in helping the Thessalonian believers to mature, but it was God's empowering grace that enabled these new believers to "stand firm in the Lord" (v. 9).

The other dimension of prayer expressed in these verses is request. Paul prayed that he would see the Thessalonians again and be able to continue the work God had begun through him. The language Paul uses in verse 10 reflects both strong desire and persistence. Paul repeatedly expresses his desire that Christ would "clear the way" for a return visit (v. 11). The language Paul uses in this request also indicates Christ's equality with the Father. The two persons of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are the subject of the singular verb translated "clear the way" in verse 12. The Apostle saw them as jointly involved in granting the answers to his prayer.

APPLY THE WORD - Thanksgiving and request are a good place to begin for anyone who is well aware that their prayer life has plenty of room for improvement. Begin by expressing your appreciation to God. Be specific. Now tell Him what you need and desire. If it helps, put it in writing. If you are still at a loss about what to say, read through the Psalms for more ideas.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Millions of people were in Atlanta last summer to "go for the gold"-- not only athletes competing for medals, but also advertisers and others hoping to cash in on the Olympics. Everyone wants to be a winner!

According to a study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, bronze medal winners are generally happier with their prizes than are silver medalists. Why? Bronze medalists are thrilled to win a medal at all, while silver medalists can't stop thinking about how close they came to gold.

When it comes to running the Christian race, we are to "go for the gold" too (see 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Heb. 12:1-2). And there's no need to settle for second- or third-best, because God wants every believer to win a prize.

That's the spirit behind the prayer Paul offered for the Thessalonians after learning that they were running a good race for Christ. He makes three specific petitions, beginning with his desire that God would remove whatever obstacles Satan had put in Paul's way to keep him from returning to Thessalonica (v. 11; see 2:18).

Then he prays that the love of these believers for one another would grow, and then overflow to the world (v. 12). This is always the direction in which our love is to flow. Love for one another is the "signature" of Jesus' disciples (John 13:34-35). If we cannot love our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, we have nothing to export to the world.

The apostle's third request is found in verse 13. He wanted the Thessalonians to be found blameless and holy at the return of Jesus Christ. Here is a theme that will become dominant in the final two chapters of this book and that will carry over into 2 Thessalonians as well.

1 Thessalonians 4

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him. - Colossians 2:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Statements of faith have always been central to the church. The Apostles' Creed was likely used to instruct new believers in the essentials of the faith. In a.d. 381, the church Council of Constantinople drafted one of the most widely cited creeds, the Nicene Creed. In 1571, the Church of England published the Thirty-Nine Articles. In 1646, the Westminster Confession of Faith was written, which has become the basis for many later Reformed statements of faith.

Why have church leaders put such value on adopting systematic summaries of core Christians doctrines? First, Christianity rests on a nonnegotiable set of affirmations about Jesus Christ—that He was born as a human being, although He is fully God; that He was crucified; that He was raised from the dead; that He now sits at the right hand of God in heaven. Second, the significance of these facts often needs to be stated in ways that can be heard afresh by new generations. Our personal faith in Jesus Christ includes our unique experiences of how He has changed our own lives, but it ultimately rests on core elements that are the same for every believer throughout history and around the world.

These core confessions are behind Paul's language of "instruction" in today's passage. Having prayed that the Thessalonians would grow in love and holiness, Paul then reminded these young believers of the instruction that he had given them when he was with them and the "basics" of Christian living that flow from this instruction. Although Paul had seen evidence of their spiritual growth, he exhorted them to press on even further in this regard.

Although Paul doesn't recap what he had taught the Thessalonians, the rest of this letter apparently revisits his instruction. First, Paul addresses godly living, including sexual purity, love for fellow believers, and proper ambitions (our next four studies). Then, he teaches about Christ's return, church discipline, and further instruction about holy living.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY According to F. F. Bruce, early Christian instruction included three components: a) the gospel (the life, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus); b) the teachings of Christ; and, c) ethical instruction in godly living. Throughout history, each component has been attacked or denied. It's always important for Christians to be grounded in the "basics." To get started, Campus Crusade for Christ offers a great resource called "10 Basic Steps toward Christian Maturity," ([10 Basic Steps Toward Christian Maturity -- Cru](#))

1 Thessalonians 4:1–8 HOPE AND HOLINESS

Has marriage become unnecessary? In his book *The Next America*, Paul Taylor reports some disturbing trends. "In a 2010 Pew Research survey, nearly 4 in 10 (39% of Americans)—and 44% of Millennials—agreed that marriage is becoming obsolete." Taylor notes that this doesn't mean young people are no longer interested in marriage. "That survey also found that 70% of Millennials say that they would like to get married one day." The real shift is not in the institution of marriage as much as it is of morals. What was once considered immoral is now widely accepted, especially in the realm of sexual behavior.

Today's Scripture emphasizes the importance of sexual morality. According to verse 3, one of the most important aspects of holy living is to "avoid sexual immorality." The word used in the New Testament text refers to a wide range of sexual sin. Abstaining from sexual immorality is a matter of God's will. It is God who defines what constitutes immorality, not the culture.

God's standard of morality demands that we control what we do with our bodies. We are not to live like animals, driven only by instinct and appetite. Paul describes an ethical landscape in which the moral practice of believers is distinct from that of the surrounding culture.

This reminder is especially timely for Christians today who are being pressured to redefine sexual standards so that practices that the Bible describes as sinful are considered morally acceptable. God expects those who belong to Christ to behave differently. Serious social and spiritual consequences are in store for those who disregard God's ethical standard. On a social level, human relationships are damaged when people are wronged and taken advantage of through sexual sin. Spiritually, Paul warns: "The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins" (v. 6). These standards are not merely Paul's. Those who reject them are really rejecting God (v. 8).

APPLY THE WORD In his book *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship Beyond an Age of Individualism*, Dale Kuehne reminds us that the limits God sets regarding sexual behavior are really good news for everyone, not bad news that ruins our lives. You can hear him explain this to interviewer Ken Myers on Volume 99 of Mars Hill Audio Journal, available as a CD or mp3 through their website.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

The father of Louisa May Alcott was prone to impractical investments, keeping the family in poverty. So Louisa, the author of *Little*

Women, wrote several Gothic novels under a pen name to help with the family finances.

One of these, a dark tale entitled *A Long Fatal Love Chase*, was rejected in 1866 and lay unpublished for over a century. Then an Alcott collector found it and took it to a publisher, who released it last year and watched the book become a bestseller.

Perhaps Alcott's novel was rejected because it did not carry her name. More likely, the book's content was out of character for an author known as ""the children's friend.""

The Thessalonians had no such problem recognizing Paul's name or character in the letters he wrote them. He identified himself clearly and even signed 2 Thessalonians with his own hand (3:17). He also made reference to what he had taught them when he planted the church (1Th. 4:1-2).

Today's text signals a major change in the direction of Paul's thought. Up to this point he has spent the letter looking back, but from here on he focuses on the present and future. The teaching Paul is about to give is God's will for believers, leading to our sanctification (1Thes 4:3).

Simply stated, sanctification is the process of becoming more like Jesus Christ. The word itself means ""to be set apart, to be holy."" And if that sounds like something only a rare few achieve, consider that the writer of Hebrews says ""without holiness no one will see the Lord"" (Heb. 12:14).

So if our sanctification is what pleases God and reflects His will, we need to sit up and pay attention! That's what Paul wanted his readers to do. This entire passage is framed in solemn exhortation and warning.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Remember the old fire drills in elementary school? We knew there was no real fire, so we felt perfectly safe as we lined up and followed our teacher to the prearranged exit.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. - 1 Thessalonians 4:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Reality TV has come of age. Because of the overwhelming success of the program *Survivor*, the networks have worked furiously to develop other programs that seem to push the limits of dignity and modesty. One such program, *Temptation Island*, has contestants who have been in serious dating relationships to spend time with other young men and women in some very compromising situations. The viewing public has been invited to watch to see how each person's relationship can be compromised, especially sexually. Such tactics fly in the face of what the Bible teaches about self-control and sexual purity.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians, he was not writing to counter reality TV! But the temptations these believers faced were every bit as intense. The culture of the first century was often hostile to Christian values and virtues. That is why the apostle had to make a case for practicing sexual self-control.

Paul's appeal to practice the virtue of self-control was based on four arguments. First, sexual purity is God's will for each and every Christian (1Th 4:3). Second, failure to maintain sexual purity can lead to judgment from God Himself (1Th 4:6). Third, self-control in sexual matters is God's calling for every Christian, especially when it came to living a holy life before a watching world (1Th 4:7, 12). And finally, sexual self-control is important because anything less works against God's Holy Spirit who indwells every believer (1Th 4:8)

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Practicing consistent thinking is much easier said than done. That is why you might want to pray about finding someone of the same sex who could become your accountability partner. Ask that person if the two of you could help each other maintain a pure thought life. You might get together each week to encourage each other to pursue healthy TV-viewing habits, reading habits, and relationships with others. This cannot guarantee we will avoid sinful actions, but it will encourage us to grow in self-control.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

Put to death ... your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust. - Colossians 3:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

In its opening weekend, the movie *Sex and the City* was the number one movie in America, earning nearly \$56 million. The movie

brought to the big screen the popular TV series that followed the lives and loves of four New York City women. Known for its graphic discussion of the largely extramarital sexual antics of these women, the series offered a window into many Americans' attitudes about morality and sexuality. In many ways this series both reflected and shaped American culture with permissive attitudes towards sex.

The Thessalonians also came out of a culture that endorsed immorality. Young men were expected to be sexually active before marriage, and married men frequently had mistresses. In large cities, temple prostitution was common. Then, like today, the idea of sexual purity seemed ridiculous.

Paul's instruction in today's passage shows the clear link between holiness—being set apart for God—and sexuality. Some mistakenly believe the two can never come together. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that sexuality is part of God's design for humanity, a gift to be enjoyed within the boundaries of marriage. Sexual immorality, whether fornication or adultery, involves sex outside of marriage.

Sexual desire is powerful, and it's easy to let it get out of control and allow lust and passion to drive one's thoughts and actions. The expression “passionate lust” has the idea of taking something, almost violently. The idea of wronging another shows that sexual sin often involves taking what's not legitimately one's own—it's grasping after what God has not given, as today's verse from Colossians makes clear. Holiness requires yielding to the Lord so that one might give oneself in reverence and love to one's marriage partner.

Although this teaching might have seemed hopelessly out of touch with reality, Paul makes it clear that rejecting such instruction meant more than ignoring Paul, it was in fact a denial of God Himself and His indwelling Holy Spirit.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's passage might be painful for some readers with promiscuous backgrounds. That's why it's essential to understand God's intentions for sexuality and His forgiveness for sins. For married readers, this passage reminds that sex is a holy gift—one that must be protected and respected. It reminds unmarried Christians to make godly choices, given today's increasingly permissive environment. For all, it challenges us that what we do with our bodies can never be separated from our growth in holiness.

1 Thessalonians 4:4 Song of Solomon 4:12-16

Each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable. - 1 Thessalonians 4:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

Despite evidence that indicates they are effective, abstinence programs continue to be a controversial approach to sex education in many public schools. Most abstinence programs do not use the Bible to convince young people not to have sex before marriage, but their strategy is based upon the old-fashioned biblical value of chastity.

Usually supporters argue that they do a better job of protecting young people from unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. One program in Tennessee, for example, was credited with helping the county drop its state ranking in teen pregnancies from first to sixty-fourth, accomplished in three years.

In today's reading, we find another important benefit to chastity. It not only protects from disease and unwanted pregnancy, it also enhances the beauty of sex in marriage.

The groom praises the chaste character of his bride by describing her as a “garden locked up,” a “spring enclosed” and a “sealed fountain.” The practice of abstinence did not make her seem like a prude, but rather like a beautiful private garden. Old Testament commentator Franz Delitzsch notes, “To a locked garden and spring no one has access but the rightful owner, and a sealed fountain is shut against all impurity.”

The practice of chastity is not rooted in a hatred of sex but an understanding of its true value. The chaste person recognizes the beauty of moral purity. Abstinence did not make the bride less attractive to Solomon, it increased his longing for her. Moral purity enhances one's enjoyment of sex.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Chastity is a relevant issue for single and married alike. Both have an obligation to control their own bodies that today's verse describes as “in a way that is holy and honorable” (1Th 4:4). For the single person this means abstaining from sexual activity until marriage. For the married person it means keeping the gate to this garden of secret delights locked to all but one's spouse. Hebrews 13:4 warns, “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”

1 Thessalonians 4:9-10

Is love innate or is it something we learn? The answer may depend upon how we define love. If we think of love only as a strong attraction to someone, it probably depends upon natural factors. When it comes to ordinary human love, like the love that exists between a child and a parent, we seem to have a natural capacity to form strong bonds. Marital love often begins with physical attraction but grows as we learn more about the other person and is sustained through effort. The love that Paul speaks of in today's passage is something different. It is both something that must be learned and a gift from God.

Paul did not need to write at great length to the Thessalonians about love between believers, but this was not because it was natural for them. This was a love they had learned from God (v. 9). Paul uses language that is drawn from the sphere of family relationships. New Testament scholar Gordon Fee notes that the Greek term that is translated "love for one another" was originally used in the Greco-Roman world to refer to the relationship between siblings: "But in this its first appearance in the New Testament it has already assumed the familial relationship that God's newly formed people had with each other because of their common relationship to God through Christ."

Those who are joined to Christ by faith are joined to one another in an extended family that spans both heaven and earth. This vast community is made up of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. As a result, it requires a quality of love that only God can produce within us. Elsewhere in the New Testament the ability to love one another in this way is described as one of the evidences of God's transforming grace (see 1 John 3:10).

APPLY THE WORD The love described in these verses is a way of relating to one another. Where should we look in order to learn the art of brotherly love? First ask, "How has God loved us?" The Father loved us enough to send His Son as an atoning sacrifice (1 John 4:10). The Scriptures also teach us to look in the mirror. We are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19).

1 Thessalonians 4:9-10; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. - 2 Corinthians 8:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the past several months, South Africa has been rocked by a series of riots, directed mainly at the large number of foreigners from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia, who seek jobs in South Africa. Thousands have been displaced and now live in tent cities, where food shortages are rampant. Table View Assembly of God church has made it its mission to collect and distribute food among these refugees. According to Christianity Today editor Mark Galli, this church is "becoming known as the church that feeds the hungry."

What a wonderful reputation to have! Similarly, the church in Thessalonica had a reputation as "the church that's known for its brotherly love." Today's reading from 2 Corinthians 8:1ff outlines how the Macedonian churches, the Thessalonian church being one of them, gave generously out of their extreme poverty to the relief fund that Paul was collecting for the impoverished Jerusalem church. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul only focuses on their love throughout Macedonia. The passage from Corinthians shows that they also loved those whom they had never met.

Yesterday we saw that Paul had to remind the Thessalonian church about sexual purity, perhaps because some problems in this regard were brought to his attention or because sexual permissiveness was so prevalent around them. In today's passage, Paul makes it clear that no reminder about brotherly love was necessary—loving each other was something that the Thessalonians had fully grasped! In fact, as we've seen before, this church was a model throughout the region (1Th 1:7).

It's likely that one way that Paul knew about the love of these believers was that they had been instrumental in establishing churches throughout this region. Recall that Thessalonica was a commercial center, and with many thousands of people going through the city, news about the love that the Thessalonians showed could have traveled quite far.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY - Christians can distinguish themselves from the surrounding culture by sexual purity and love for others. Apparently, the Thessalonians needed some reminders about the first area, but they were doing well in the second. Even so, Paul urged them to love "more and more." Both purity and love grow the more they're exercised. Consider whether your thoughts and attitudes are more pure and whether your love for others is greater than a year ago. If not, ask the Spirit to show you how to grow in these areas.

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

In his book *Leap Over a Wall*, author Eugene Peterson describes work as "the primary context for our spirituality." Ordinary work is not opposed to spirituality. Peterson observes, "The spiritual life begins—seriously begins—when we get a job and go to work."

If we understand our entire lives to be an act of true worship, then the place of work is actually a place of worship. Our work matters

to God because the workplace is the context in which we live much of our lives. Most of us spend more time at work than we do at church. We may spend as much or more of our waking hours at work than we do at home.

As Paul continues the thought begun in yesterday's passage, he urges the Thessalonians to excel in their love for one another by aspiring to "a quiet life." The two subsequent commands in verse 11 shed further light on the kind of "quiet" life the Apostle has in view. Paul tells his readers to "mind your own business and work with your hands." Those who lead a quiet life live responsibly. They tend to their own affairs and refrain from meddling. Those who are able to work are in a position to provide for their own needs and to help others who are unable to work.

The quiet life of the believer does not go unnoticed, and this is an important aspect of the church's testimony to those who are "outsiders" (v. 12). Our work is also our witness. It has spiritual value because it is one of the ways we show the world how Jesus Christ has transformed our lives. Work also has practical value. It is the primary means that God uses to meet our needs. Our provision of work is also the means He uses to provide for the needs of others.

APPLY THE WORD - Ordinary work as Paul describes it in these verses is a mode of ministry, the context in which you can bear witness to your faith by simply living out the Christian life. As God provides for your needs through your work, He enables you to be a channel of His grace. Make it your ambition today to work for the glory of God.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. - Colossians 3:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Over the course of the past ten years, heated discussions have developed over how government tax money should be used for public welfare. Some states have tried to implement "welfare to work" programs. Other government agencies have provided regular payments to people who have very limited resources. There is often tension over doing what is loving and doing what is responsible.

Today's Scripture reading can give us some added insight into how we might resolve this dilemma, especially when it comes to implementing brotherly kindness towards other believers. Paul provides us with two principles that we can employ when we need wisdom in this regard. These principles might be identified as "duty" and "discernment."

The Thessalonians were living out their Christian faith well. They had become a model of faithfulness and spiritual fervor (1Th 1:4-10). It also appears that they were doing quite well in the exercise of brotherly love.

But how would they know if they were using their resources wisely? That is where the concept of duty comes into play. The Thessalonians had been taught to love each other as brothers, understanding from their relationship with Christ that caring for other believers was to be a priority. Their sense of obligation to practice brotherly love led them to minister to other Christians throughout Macedonia (1Th 4:9-10).

But how would they know whether someone was "ripping them off"? Here is where the principle of "discernment" comes into the picture. Paul was aware of a problem in the Thessalonian church where some Christians, even though they were physically fit, were not working. The Apostle tells the church to encourage such people to work so as to gain the respect of people outside the church (1Th 4:11-12). That is, they were to use discernment to know whether a person was able to work.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It has been said that you can measure the quality of one's spiritual life by looking at his or her checkbook. What would your check registry reveal about the virtue of brotherly kindness in your life? Take a few minutes to see how you have been spending God's money. How much money has been spent to help Christians in need, whether in the United States or overseas? How much money have you set aside for those purposes? Your answer to these questions may help you to grow in the virtue of brotherly kindness.

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. - Colossians 4:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Celebrity weeklies are a big—and a highly competitive—business. Each week, slick magazines such as People, US Weekly, In Touch Weekly, and Star, compete for lucrative single-copy newsstand sales. One-time events, such as the first photos of the late Anna Nicole Smith's daughter, Dannielynn, boosted sales for OK! magazine by 41 percent. Top-selling People magazine averages about 1.5 million newsstand sales per week, with over 3.7 million annual subscribers. In 2004, celebrity weeklies brought in \$783 million, nearly one third of all newsstand revenue.

What is it about celebrities that holds such fascination for so many? Perhaps it's the titillating desire to know "the real scoop" about the glamorous; perhaps it's an attempt to live vicariously through celebrity lives. Whatever the reason, it's clear that a lot of people are willing to devote money and time to follow the ups and downs of celebrities.

The Thessalonians weren't consumed by celebrity weeklies, but it's clear that some were having a hard time minding their own business. The "quiet life" that Paul has in mind suggests a life that isn't overly driven or ambitious for the things that don't matter. It means a life concerned with how one is doing with the Lord, and not trying to keep up with what everyone else is doing.

There also seems to have been a problem with some Thessalonian Christians believing that the Lord was returning so soon that working for a living was no longer necessary. These individuals were apparently relying upon the generosity of others within the local body of Christ. It's also possible that some had an aversion to manual labor, which was looked down upon by many Greeks. Elsewhere the Bible makes it clear that some individuals, such as widows, have a legitimate need to be taken care of by the local church (see Acts 6). Here, however, the problem appears to be laziness and an undue preoccupation with other people's lives.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This passage offers two cautions concerning our witness as a Christian community to unbelievers. First, it warns against being a "busybody," or becoming inappropriately involved in other people's business. Second, this passage doesn't suggest that we have nothing to do with others. We're not supposed to have a hands-off policy, holding ourselves aloof. Instead, it's about the right concern for one another that shows to outsiders the loving trust and care that's possible within the body of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Famed educator Booker T. Washington recalled the "entrance exam" that earned him a place at the Hampton Institute in Virginia as a young man.

The head teacher ordered Washington to take a broom and sweep the classroom. Because he knew this was his chance, he swept the room three times and dusted the furniture four times. When the teacher returned, she inspected the floor closely and ran her handkerchief over the woodwork. Unable to find a speck of dust anywhere, she said, "I guess you will do to enter this institution." Washington later said that this was the turning point of his life.

The annals of achievement are filled with the names of people such as Booker T. Washington, men and women who never shied away from hard work. Too bad the Thessalonian church didn't have one of their biographies to read!

As much as Paul loved and commended these believers, a group of people in the church had apparently decided that work was not for them. How can the existence of this group of idlers be explained? Perhaps work was scarce in the city. It's also possible that given the Thessalonians' lack of understanding about the return of Christ, these people had decided to stop working and just wait for Jesus to return.

The first explanation is unlikely, since Paul says the problem was their unwillingness to work (2Th 3:10), not their inability to work. If the refusal to carry their share of the load was because of misguided beliefs about Christ's return, the idlers needed stern correction. Why? Because they were not acting in love toward their fellow believers (1Th 4:9-10). Living as parasites off others in the body of Christ is the opposite of self-giving agape love.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We are told that the ancient Greeks sniffed at ordinary labor, disdaining it in favor of higher pursuits. But work is God's idea. He worked and commanded man to work. As a youth in Nazareth, Jesus dignified labor by working alongside Joseph. Has God given you the capacity and ability to work for your living? You can do two simple things right now to express your gratitude.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Facing death due to terminal cancer, pastor Dr. Donald C. Wilson wrote in his book, *Terminal Candor*:

"It is facing our dying that improves the quality of our living...I am finding that there are some real rewards in facing death before it takes place... When we are moving at a walk, hand can reach out and touch hand, fears can be shared, burdens can be lifted. Like the Psalmist we may find that, never more so than in the valley of dying, we are in the presence of God."

Wilson had hope because he believed that death was not the end. Had he not by faith known this comforting truth, facing cancer would have been far more frightening and final. That's the situation the Thessalonians found themselves in. They didn't understand

the doctrines surrounding Christ's return, and were grieving for deceased loved ones whom they thought were gone forever.

With today's reading we begin another major section of Paul's letter, one which will carry us nearly to the end of the book. The subject is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, beginning with the event we call the "Rapture," a term taken from the Latin translation of the phrase "caught up" (1Th 4:17).

Notice that Paul does not scold the church for its mistaken fear that departed friends and family members were gone forever. Grief is normal in the face of great loss; but the Christian grieves in a way different from others, "who have no hope" (1Th 4:13).

The difference is hope and the source of which is Jesus Christ (v. 14). Paul taught the Thessalonians the truth of Christ's resurrection, an essential part of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:4).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The lack of knowledge these early Christians displayed toward some basic truths of the faith is understandable. They didn't have a Bible to open and read, as we do.

We have an incredible advantage over them, don't we? We have the "whole counsel" of God conveniently bound into a single volume. The only credible response to the precious treasure of God's Word is to soak our minds and hearts in His truth.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-15

In the journal later published under the title *A Grief Observed*, Christian apologist C. S. Lewis offers a blunt account of his struggle with faith that ensued after the death of his wife Joy Davidman. "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear," Lewis observed. "I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid."

The hope of the gospel does not make us immune to grief when someone we love dies. Thankfully, however, the gospel does give us the dimension of faith so that we do not "grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope" (v. 13). But in order to grieve differently, our grief must be paired with the knowledge of how Christ's death and resurrection affect those who have died in the faith.

The Thessalonians wanted to know what would happen to believers who die before Christ's Second Coming. Paul's reassuring answer was that the Thessalonians would see them again. The dead in Christ will return with Christ. This is a miraculous work of God. It is important to note that this is a hope that belongs only to those who have been joined to Christ by faith in His death and resurrection. If we are not trusting in Christ for forgiveness and eternal life, we "have no hope" in death.

Those who are united with Christ by faith belong to Christ. They also belong with Christ. Before His suffering Jesus prayed, "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24). As the Heidelberg Catechism states, my hope in death is this: "That I am not my own, but that I belong—in body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ."

APPLY THE WORD - Grief is a struggle, even for those who have a strong faith. Grief is an emotional state. Faith is a conviction grounded in the truth that God has revealed. If you are grieving today, you may want to express your feelings to God in writing like C. S. Lewis. Faith will remind you of your hope, and hope will strengthen you in grief.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Death has been swallowed up in victory. - 1 Corinthians 15:54

TODAY IN THE WORD

People have many ideas about what the Rapture might be like. One cartoon shows two fathers, the one opening the door to his backyard where several kids are seen jumping on a trampoline. He says to the other father, "You're just in time for rapture practice!" Or there's the bumper sticker that reads: "In case of the rapture, can I have your car?" Today's passage is the only place in the Bible that directly discusses this important topic.

The Thessalonians were troubled about believers who had already died. Apparently, they were so concerned that some had become like those "who have no hope." It's likely that this confusion arose in part because the Christian teaching about the resurrection was difficult for many pagans to understand. Unlike Jews who hoped for a final resurrection of the Jewish nation, most Gentiles had only vague ideas about the immortality of soul.

It's clear that Paul had already instructed the Thessalonians about bodily resurrection. (1Thes 4:14 probably reflects an early creedal statement.) Yet apparently some mistakenly felt that believers who had died before the Lord's return had missed out. To offer

assurance and correction, Paul appeals to a “word of the Lord” (1Th 4:15). This teaching of Christ isn't explicitly recorded in the Gospels (but see John 21:25), although it parallels Matthew 24:30-31 and Mark 13:26-27.

When considered with the rest of biblical teaching about the end times, this passage indicates that the Rapture will occur before the Great Tribulation, followed by Christ's return. Some Christians believe that the Rapture and Christ's return will occur together, but what's undeniably clear—and a great encouragement for all believers—is that Jesus is coming back for His own. After those who have died in Christ are raised (1Th 4:16), then those who are still alive at that time will join with them and with Christ. The archangel and the trumpet (1Th 4:16) reveal the glory that accompanies this great event.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Rapture of the church merits further study. We suggest the following three resources, available online or from your local bookstore. Three Views on the Rapture (published by Zondervan) has contributions by noted Bible scholars Paul Feinberg, Douglas Moo, and Richard Reiter and is edited by Gleason Archer Jr. Additionally, the following books contain chapters or sections on the Rapture: Moody Handbook of Theology by Paul Enns and The Great Doctrines of the Bible by William Evans (both from Moody Publishers).

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 3:7

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. - Revelation 3:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Theologian and educator E. Y. Mullins said concerning Christ's return, “Among the early Christians the expectation of Christ's near return was a moral and spiritual incentive of the highest value. The age was one of great trial and suffering. The thought of Christ's return in power was a source of great consolation, and inspired zeal and devotion.”

On Monday we talked about the skeptics who ridicule the teaching of Christ's return and see no evidence that He has remembered the people on this planet.

But for believers, the truth of Christ's return is a source of wonderful hope. People can endure a lot of suffering and setbacks when they know there is a purpose for it. Christ's promise to come back for us gives us an ultimate sense of purpose and hope for the future that nothing should be able to shake.

The church at Thessalonica needed hope. This was very early in the church's history. These Christians didn't know what we know, so they began to despair over the fate of fellow believers who had died. Paul was eager to peel back a corner of heaven and show them the hope they had.

This great passage is a source of our hope, too, because we understand that Christ appears here not for judgment, but to take His people back to heaven with Him prior to the great tribulation. This “catching away” is known as the rapture, and it is our hope.

The promise to the church at Philadelphia, representative of the true church, adds further substance to this hope. The risen Christ assured His followers that because they had been faithful to Him, He would keep them “from,” or “out of,” the terrible ordeal of tribulation coming upon the whole earth (Rev 3:10).

When the pieces are put together, the picture reveals a future so wonderful that it overwhelms anything we may have to endure now. Paul said we “will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thes. 4:17). That's an encouragement no one can take from us.

The hope and promise of our future with Christ should also motivate us to please Him and live for Him now, as Mullins said. Our hope is a purifying force as well as a comforting and reassuring reality.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The apostle John said that when we see Jesus, “we shall be like Him” (1 John 3:2). Then John drew the logical conclusion from this fact. If we are going to be like Jesus for all of eternity, we had better learn how to be like Him here in time. So John urged us to purify ourselves, just as Jesus is pure (v. 3). This same writer told us how to keep our lives clean: by confessing our sins and receiving Christ's forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:9).

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

The Christmas carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written by the nineteenth-century American preacher Phillips Brooks after he visited the Holy Land. One of its verses describes the relative obscurity of Christ's first coming and compares it with the mystery of the new birth: “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!” When Jesus gathers the church to Himself, the scene will be different. Christ's coming for His own will be announced with a shout (literally a “command”), the voice of the archangel, and a

trumpet blast. These elements accompanied an imperial visit from the Roman emperor, and Old Testament passages include these descriptions when God reveals His presence to His people (see Ex. 19:16; Ps. 47:5).

The Lord Himself will “come down from heaven” (v. 16). This kind of language speaks of a concrete event rather than a spiritual or philosophical idea. Christ’s victory will not be simply the triumph of His ideas over all other faith systems. It will be a victory of His person—His literal embodied self—over His enemies. Jesus will come in the flesh to claim His own. This is what the angels promised the disciples when they watched Jesus ascend into heaven from the Mount of Olives. “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

This divine event follows an ordered sequence. First, believers who have died will be resurrected and caught up to meet Christ. Paul emphasized this to reassure those in Thessalonica who were afraid that believers who already died might be overlooked. Then those who are alive will be “caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17). These two dimensions are part of the same event.

APPLY THE WORD - Paul makes it clear that this “blessed hope” belongs only to those who are “in Christ.” It is the “dead in Christ” and those who are in Christ but are “still alive” who will meet Christ in the air. If you have not yet trusted in Jesus Christ for eternal life, turn to Him today. This hope can be yours!

1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

TODAY IN THE WORD

Few things are more annoying than guests who overstay their visit--especially when other guests are waiting for their rooms. This is a problem many first-class hotels in America's major cities face when demand for rooms is high, and it's getting worse. The problem may be unavoidable when a guest's business causes a longer stay than expected. But many people deliberately stay longer than they say they will, knowing the hotel will probably do little about it.

Overstaying our “visit” on this earth will not be a problem for us as Christians. The Lord Himself will return for His church--and not one minute too late. Those who have died “in Christ” will be raised, and we will all meet our Lord and be with Him forever.

That's the basic outline of the Rapture, the glorious event that will precede the Great Tribulation and usher in a period called “the day of the Lord” (1Th 5:2). Paul intended this revelation to be a comfort and an encouragement to the Thessalonians (1Thes 4:18), who were grieving over deceased loved ones they thought they would never see again.

But Paul was doing more than passing along encouraging information. His use of “we” (v. 17) shows that Paul fully expected Jesus Christ to return in his own lifetime. The fact that this did not happen does not diminish our faith in the certainty of Christ's coming. Nor should it lessen our anticipation of His imminent, or soon, coming. The “loud command” and the “trumpet call” could come today!

We can imagine the comfort and new hope the people at Thessalonica found as they read today's text for the first time. Our comfort should be even greater because we have the full revelation of God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Compare 1Thes 4:18 of today's text with 1 Corinthians 15:58 and you'll see what the hope of Christ's return can mean to you today. First, it can be a great comfort to you. If death is not an enemy to be feared (note 1 Cor. 15:54-56), nothing should be able to shake your hope and peace of mind today. Someone has said, “I've read the last chapter of God's Book, and we win!”

1 Thessalonians 5

1 Thessalonians 5:1-3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Toward the end of his life, British novelist H.G. Wells grew despairing about the fate of the human race. One evening at dinner, Wells laid out his picture of the future. Mankind had failed because evolution had failed to produce in us the right kind of brain. Therefore, Wells claimed, we will destroy ourselves, die out as a species, and revert to the mud and slime from which we arose. “And we shall deserve our fate,” he said, adding that the human race had only “one thousand years more” to survive.

What a sad and distorted picture of reality when compared to the truth of Scripture! The humblest believer in ancient Thessalonica knew far more about eschatology--the doctrine of “last things”--than H. G. Wells and those like him “know” about the future of

humanity.

Paul said he had already taught the church there about ""the day of the Lord"" (1Th 5:2). This term covers a long period of time, from the Rapture through the Tribulation and on into Christ's millennial kingdom.

Notice the descriptive terms Paul uses to describe what Christ's coming will be like for the unbelieving world. It will be as sudden and as frightening as a thief bursting into a house in the middle of the night, and as agonizing and inevitable as the labor pains of a pregnant woman delivering her child (1Th 5:2-3). Paul chose his words carefully under the direction of the Holy Spirit, because Christ's return will mean destruction for those who have rejected Him.

One reason Christ's return will be so devastating is that it will come at a time when world peace has seemingly been achieved. Verse 3 refers to the seven-year treaty the Antichrist will sign with Israel (Dan. 9:27). He will break his covenant in the middle of this period, unleashing the horrible judgments of the Great Tribulation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We are just beginning this section that talks about the end-time judgments that await those who don't know Christ. Second Thessalonians 2 will add to the picture. Facing God's wrath against sin is a future no believer would wish on anyone. Back on November, we encouraged you to pray for a friend or a family member who needs Christ. Have you seen God work in that person's heart since then?

1 Thessalonians 5:1-3

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. - Acts 1:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the late 1980s, Korean pastor Lee Jang-rim predicted that Christ would return on October 28, 1992. Thousands of his followers sold their houses in preparation. When the date passed uneventfully, some committed suicide. Lee was later imprisoned for stealing \$4 million from his parishioners. A few years later, predictions of Christ's return abounded in anticipation of the Hale-Bopp comet in 1997. Nearly a century earlier, Charles Taze Russell, the founder of Jehovah's Witnesses, used intricate Bible studies to claim that Christ would return in 1910, which he later changed to 1914, and then again to 1929.

Since Christ's ascension, there's been no shortage of predictions of the year—or in some cases, the very hour—of His return. Today's passage cautions against such efforts. As we saw in yesterday's study, believers are to be encouraged by the certainty that the Lord is coming back for His own, even if all the details of that glorious event aren't as clear as we might wish.

Verse 1 indicates that Paul had taught about this before. There may have been some false teachers in Thessalonica who claimed that the day of the Lord had already taken place. Others were claiming that there wasn't anything to worry about, perhaps denying any final judgment, preaching "peace and safety." The mention of the thief indicates that the day of the Lord is associated with judgment, just as it is in the Old Testament (see Amos 5:18-20 and Zeph. 1:14-18).

Many scholars believe that Christians will be raptured before the events described in this passage. Others claim that believers will be raptured either during or after these terrible events. But Scripture is clear that no one will be able to predict the exact time at which the Lord will return. Yesterday's passage shows that it will be a glorious event for believers; today's passage adds that it will be destruction for those who have rejected Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY - Concerning the Lord's return, we must be careful to avoid two extremes. The first is to become preoccupied with efforts to determine a precise time and date. The second is to think so little about this event that nothing in our daily lives is impacted. Consider for a moment what changes you would make in your life if the Lord were to return next week ... or today. As we'll see tomorrow, wise believers live as if the Lord might return any day.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-4 HOPE AND EXPECTATION

The arrival of the President of the United States at formal functions is often announced by the anthem "Hail to the Chief." Many Americans are familiar with the tune but they may not know that the song also has lyrics. The title comes from The Lady of the Lake, a poem by Sir Walter Scott. James Sanderson adapted a portion of the poem for a play by using an old Scottish tune. In the twentieth century, Albert Gamse used the title phrase and melody as a basis for the American anthem.

Paul warns that Christ's Second Coming will come suddenly and without fanfare. Jesus' return will be preceded by a period of divine judgment that will take the world by surprise. The phrase "the day of the Lord" appears throughout Scripture, especially in the Old Testament prophets, in contexts that speak of judgment (cf. Isa. 13:6, 9; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:11; 3:14; Amos 5:18–20; Obad. 1:15; Zeph. 1:7, 14). This "day" really refers to a series of events that includes Christ's return and final judgment.

This will come like a thief who breaks in while the homeowner is asleep. Jesus used similar language in Matthew 24:1–14 when the disciples asked about the sign of His coming and the end of the age. He warned of a coming time of “great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again” (Matt. 24:21). People will believe they are in a position of peace and safety, even as destruction comes upon them (v. 3).

Jesus warned that it would be like the days of Noah: “For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:38–39).

APPLY THE WORD - People have wondered about the timing of these events for generations. But those who have trusted in Jesus Christ and take God at His word have no need to worry about “times and dates.” They are waiting for the Father to send His Son from heaven and rescue them from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:10). This is part of the blessed hope that comes from trusting in Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:2 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:11

You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. - 1 Thessalonians 5:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

When parents leave their children with a babysitter, behavior is often affected by how soon the parents will return. If Mom and Dad have just left, the kids might take their chances and disobey the sitter's instructions or try to persuade her to let them do something the parents wouldn't allow. But if Mom and Dad's car might pull into the driveway at any moment, the kids are more likely to be on their very best behavior.

Since Christ's return will come “like a thief in the night,” we should always be on our best behavior; that is, we should live as people who will one day give an account for every day before the Lord. The Second Coming of Christ is a truth that should affect our daily lives! It certainly affected Paul's life deeply. Because he knew he served a living Savior who had promised to come again, he could endure suffering with joy. Christ's return was a key element in his purpose-filled life and one of the reasons he and Silas could sing in prison (see yesterday's reading). That's why we've chosen today's reading. 1 Thessalonians was written about 51 A.D., during the second missionary journey, and is usually considered to be the second letter written by Paul.

Paul summarized God's purpose for us as pleasing Him, acting as set apart or sanctified people, and avoiding sexual immorality. Holiness is every believer's calling, to be lived out quietly, with love for others and in the power of the Spirit. The term brotherly love reminds us that we're all children in God's family and should be living in such a way as to “win the respect of outsiders” (1Th 4:12).

Christ's return is the ultimate motivation to live with these purposes in our lives. Because He rose from the dead, we have great hope! When He comes again to make all things right and new, we'll be reunited with our deceased, believing loved ones and fully united with Him. Death is a grievous fact, but it carries no lasting sting (1 Cor. 15:53-57). We need to encourage and exhort one another with these truths and live as children of light (1Th 5:5).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Breathing brief, repetitive prayers throughout the day is a form of prayer which has a rich history in Christian tradition, but is little-known or practiced in some circles today. The idea is to concentrate on saying a simple biblical idea that through repetition soaks deeply into your heart, mind, and soul. If you wish, try this type of prayer today with the phrase, “Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus.” By the end of the day, we believe you'll be looking forward to Christ's return even more than you do now!

1 Thessalonians 5:4-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

On the night of April 8, 1871, evangelist D. L. Moody preached to his largest Chicago audience ever on the topic, “What then shall I do with Jesus?” At the end of his sermon, Moody urged everyone present to return in one week with a response—to follow Jesus Christ or not.

But as the audience left the meeting hall, fire bells were ringing throughout the city. The Great Chicago Fire had begun, the hall was destroyed, and the following week there was no meeting.

For the rest of his life, Moody regretted not having given an invitation to receive Christ that very night. Some of the people in his audience died in the Fire, and that night may have been their last chance.

Chicago and Moody were caught off guard by the fire. Christ's Second Coming will also be unexpected, but Scripture is full of

warnings for us to be watchful and to live holy lives (see 1 Tim. 4:7).

In today's reading, Paul's metaphor is a good one to contrast those who are ready for Christ's return with those who are not. As we noted yesterday, this was one area in which the Thessalonian church had already received instruction, meaning there was no reason for them to be caught off guard.

This passage overflows with contrasts. Paul sets light against darkness and day against night as symbols of spiritual realities. He also draws a contrast between two types of people. Nothing could be more opposite than a drunk staggering through the darkness, unaware of his surroundings and unprepared for anything, and a soldier on alert, fully awake and armed for battle. Paul's brief reference to the armor of God reminds us of its classic statement in Ephesians 6:10-18.

In this text, Paul links the armor to his favorite trio of godly virtues: faith, love and hope (1Th 5:8; see also 1Th 1:3). With these things in place, the Thessalonians would be alert and self-controlled, well-prepared for Christ's return.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We have been hitting some very timely and sobering texts on Sundays this month, and today's text follows that pattern. We need to remember that Paul was writing to the church at Thessalonica, not just to a group of individual Christians. The church is commended for faithfully teaching God's Word and helping believers stay alert.

1 Thessalonians 5:4 Acts 1:1-11

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. - 1 Thessalonians 5:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

The remarkable sales of the Left Behind series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, have put a spotlight on both the interest and anxiety many feel about the return of Christ. The results of a recent poll posted on the series' Left Behind revealed that nearly 50 percent of the respondents were "anxiously awaiting" Christ's return. Three out of ten said that they hoped Christ would return in their lifetime—but not yet. Two out of ten said that they were unprepared and were afraid that they would be left behind when Jesus Christ returns for His church.

We should not be surprised at such interest. Jesus' own disciples were curious about the events that would lead up to the establishment of His kingdom. Meeting with Him on the Mount of Olives not long after the Resurrection, they asked whether the time had come to restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). This question was not prompted by idle speculation. Jesus' disciples had a personal stake in the matter. During His earthly ministry, Jesus had promised the apostles that He would confer upon them a kingdom and that they would each sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:30).

The fact that Jesus did not give a precise date when responding to the disciples' question does not mean that we should ignore the subject of Christ's return. Today's verse reminds us that when that day arrives, it shouldn't come as a surprise to us. But if we are not to know the times or the dates, which have been placed under the Father's authority, how can we avoid being taken by surprise? The answer is found in Jesus' charge to be His witnesses by the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8). This is more than a command; ultimately it is a promise. Those who follow Jesus are called to be living demonstrations of the reality of His power and authority as they wait for Him to return. We are not waiting passively, but rather we are to keep our focus on His return through our active lives of purpose to bring glory to God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We do not need to know the day or the time of Christ's return because we are to live every day with the expectation that He might return for us today. As we work and wait for that day to arrive, we can learn more about what the Bible teaches about the second coming of Christ. For a theological treatment of the subject, ask for Understanding Endtime Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach by Paul Benware (Moody Publishers) at your local Christian bookstore.

1 Thessalonians 5:4-11

Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. - Matthew 25:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Once ten young women joyously anticipated the groom's arrival. It was getting dark, so they turned on the flashlights they had with them. Five also brought extra batteries in case the wait was long. As they waited, they got sleepy and fell asleep. Suddenly, someone cried, "He's coming, he's coming!" By then the batteries had worn down on the flashlights, but the five with extra batteries quickly swapped in the fresh batteries. The others asked them for spare batteries, but there weren't any. So they ran off to the

nearest all-night supermarket. But while they were gone, the groom arrived and all those who were ready joined him and entered the banquet hall. Then the doors were locked. When those who had gone to get batteries came back, it was too late.

You might think that the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) is unfair: why didn't the five women with extra batteries share? Why were the doors locked? How could they have known they would wait so long? But Jesus told this story (here with slightly updated technology) to show that His true followers must live always prepared for His return.

We don't know if this parable was in Paul's mind when he wrote 1 Thessalonians. Both passages make it clear that those who live unprepared for Christ's return will get caught off guard and will have terrible consequences. Darkness often portrays moral rebellion in the Bible. Sleep portrays a lack of readiness or vigilance for His return. It also suggests a moral indifference. Drunkenness indicates the dulling effect that comes from preoccupation with worldly things and ways.

This passage is sobering, but Paul offers several encouragements. First, as believers, we're in the light (1Thes 5:5). Second, because of this, we're to put on faith, love, and hope. This military image indicates that this triad—faith, love, and hope—actually protects our hearts and minds against the moral darkness around us. Third, believers aren't awaiting wrath, but salvation. Finally, we're to encourage one another with these powerful truths.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Bible scholar G. K. Beale writes, "To be drunk spiritually is to imbibe too much of the world's way of looking at things and not enough of the way God views reality. To be intoxicated with the world's wine is to be numbed to feeling any fear in the presence of a coming judgment." Like the wise virgins, we're to live ready for Christ to return at any time. Rather than being caught off guard or ashamed, we'll be ready to enter the wedding hall rejoicing and singing.

1 Thessalonians 5:5–11 LIVING WITH THE END IN VIEW

"Doomsday preppers" are people who take measures, some of them extreme, to prepare for widespread disaster. They expect civilization as we know it to collapse. Some stockpile freeze-dried food, water purification devices, and even weapons. Their goal is to be self-sufficient when "the big one" hits. The Apostle took a different approach. For Paul living with the end in view requires spiritual vigilance and self-control more than stockpiling.

Paul contrasts the children of light with those who "belong to the night." Those who are "of the day" are alert and self controlled (v. 5). Those who belong to the night engage in practices consistent with the domain of darkness. This figurative language highlights the difference between those who expect Christ to return and those who do not. The expectation of Christ's return and the certainty of coming judgment should not drive us into isolation or self-centered living. We prepare by "putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (v. 8).

Those who belong to Christ do not need to be afraid of the future. They can approach the end with a sense of confidence because they know that they have not been appointed to endure the wrath of God to come upon the world. Such confidence is not a mark of self-complacency or conceit. It is the result of faith. Jesus is what separates the children of light from those who belong to the domain of darkness.

Everyone who has received salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ is appointed to salvation. Some in the Thessalonian church had been worried about those who would die before Christ's return. Paul assured them that there was no need for concern. Whether we are alive ("awake") or dead ("asleep") our destiny is to live with Christ. This certainty is both a source of comfort and a motivation for holy living.

APPLY THE WORD

If we have the hope of Christ, we do not need to speculate about the future. We already know enough to be prepared, and so we don't need to be afraid. Jesus frees us from the "everyone for himself" mentality that is reflected in much of doomsday culture. Those who live with the end in view bear witness to the hope of Christ and build one another up.

1 Thessalonians 5:9-11

TODAY IN THE WORD

While on a special inspection mission for the government during World War II, former flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker and his crew were forced to ditch their plane in the Pacific Ocean. Rickenbacker and seven others floated on rubber rafts for twenty-four days before being rescued.

He later recalled how they endured their ordeal: ""Each man found salvation and strength in prayer, and a community of feeling developed which created a liveliness of human fellowship and worship, and a sense of gentle peace.""

That's a good picture of how Paul wanted the church at Thessalonica to survive and thrive in the midst of a harsh, alien environment. The church isn't supposed to pull away from the world and hide within its own walls. But in a world that the Bible says is like a troubled, restless sea, God's people are to be an island of peace.

Paul prayed for the Thessalonians' peace in his salutation to this letter (1Thes 1:1-2). But their peace had been shaken by concern over their departed loved ones. So Paul comforted them with the truth of the Rapture, urging them to remind one another often of this encouraging reality.

That discussion has led to further teaching on the end times here in 1Thes 5. We've seen that Christ's return and the events that will follow are not at all good news for unbelievers. What should Christians do and how should we feel about the prospect of God's judgment falling on earth?

What we should do is be sober and alert, watching for the Lord's return and listening for "the trumpet call of God" (1Th 4:16). What we should feel is peace of heart, not fearing God's wrath because we have a different "appointment" awaiting us--full and final salvation (1Th 5:9)!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Mondays often make us feel anything but peaceful. So why not do something about these feelings before the waves hit? Go over your schedule for the week, writing down the things ahead that are most likely to disturb your peace--anything from a difficult corporate decision to a teething baby.

1Thessalonians 5:12-13 THE CHURCH AND ITS LEADERS

Some estimates conclude that one out of four pastors has been forcibly terminated by their church at some point during their career. In most cases these forced terminations are the result of personality conflicts or differences over ministry vision. They are rarely a result of moral failure or doctrinal deviation. The church does not always get along with its leaders.

This is not a new problem; the same was true in Paul's day. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, Paul tells the church how it should view its leaders. This relationship should be characterized by respect. Three phrases describe the ministry of these church leaders. First, it is hard work. Church leadership is demanding. The Greek verb in verse 12 was used at the time to refer to manual labor. Few church members know all that is involved in this kind of ministry. Many think that their pastor only works for a few hours on Sunday. They do not see the time spent in prayer, sermon preparation, counseling, and leadership.

The second phrase Paul uses to describe the work of church leaders emphasizes their spiritual authority. They "care for you in the Lord." This language connotes spiritual responsibility rather than ownership or control. The church's leaders are servants, not dictators. They do not own the congregation, and the church does not "employ" the pastor. The pastor is a servant of Christ. Church leaders are placed in the church the way a caretaker might have responsibility to care for a household that belongs to someone else. This means that ministry is stewardship more than it is an exercise of political power.

The third phrase Paul uses indicates that this work of leadership is personal. He describes these church leaders as those "who admonish you." This is a ministry of the word and of pastoral concern. A pastor's work is the care of souls, and verse 13 reveals that the church also has a responsibility to care for its pastors.

APPLY THE WORD Pray for each of your church's leaders by name. Pray for their endurance, spiritual health, family, and relationships. Ask God to help your church live in peace with one another. Then think of some concrete way to show your high regard for their work, perhaps with an encouraging post on your favorite social media platform or a note with a gift card for a special dinner.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

TODAY IN THE WORD

As his UCLA football team suffered through a poor season in the early 1970s, head coach Pepper Rodgers came under intense criticism and pressure from alumni and fans. Things got so bad, he remembers with a smile, that friends became hard to find. "My dog was my only true friend," Rodgers says of that year. "I told my wife that every man needs at least two good friends--and she bought me another dog."

They say it's lonely at the top, especially when things go poorly. On occasion the church has been compared to an athletic team of which the pastor is the head coach, but Pepper Rodgers's experience demonstrates how unlike these two worlds really are, for example, in the area of leadership.

Coaches are paid to win. If they don't win, they are fair game for every critic in town. The church sometimes takes that attitude toward its leaders, but the focus should be instead on living in peace together. Why? Because God has put us in union with one another.

Given that emphasis, why should we honor our spiritual leaders? ""Because of their work"" (v. 13), not because they think like us or do things the way we would do them. There's always room for discussion and disagreement, but God's people violate the command of today's verse when they create needless turmoil in the church.

Paul deliberately emphasizes the hard work of the ministry. In the light of what we know of the idlers in Thessalonica, Paul's admonition was no doubt a prod to those who wanted to sit by and watch others carry the load.

Idlers need to be warned (1Th 5:14). But they are only one group in the body that needs special attention. Timid believers are easily discouraged and frightened. Their need for encouragement is obvious. The weak, those not strong enough to stand on their own, need a helping hand.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Being patient with others is hard when someone else's faults and shortcomings become the focus of our attention. Is there someone close to you who has a habit or trait that rubs you the wrong way? Rather than yielding to impatience or to the temptation to write that person off, step back today and take a fresh look at the situation.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

I urge ... that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness. - 1 Timothy 2:1-2

TODAY IN THE WORD

In December 2007, the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) ran a story about Pastor Buddy Westbrook and a lawsuit that had been filed against him and the church that he pastors, Crossland Community Bible Church. When Pastor Westbrook discovered that a woman in his church was seeking a divorce because she had a relationship with another man, he and the church elders carefully followed the procedures outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 for confronting a brother or sister caught in sin. Although the church intended restoration and healing, the woman who was confronted still decided to divorce her husband and marry the other man. She then proceeded to sue Pastor Westbrook for allegedly violating confidentiality, although she had previously agreed to the church's constitution, which explained the policy of church discipline.

While this case is complicated and is still in court, it shows a growing misunderstanding that many Christians have concerning the purpose and value of church leaders. It seems that there was similar confusion occurring in Thessalonica. 1Thes 5:12, 13 suggest that church leaders were not respected or loved, although they were pouring their lives out for the Thessalonians. Many in the Thessalonian church probably became believers at the same time, so it's not hard to imagine that some would balk at the idea of fellow believers having spiritual authority over them, even if, as seems to be the case, these leaders had been chosen by Paul and were spiritually gifted.

The idleness described here (1Th 5:14) may have involved those who stopped working, anticipating the immediate return of the Lord. But the Greek word is probably better translated as "undisciplined" or "disruptive." By not working, these individuals were apparently entangled in matters they shouldn't have been. The timid may have become "faint-hearted" over the death of dear friends and confusion about their final state. The weak here were likely spiritually weak or immature. Clearly these church leaders had their hands full!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

1Th 5:16-18 present three characteristics of the Christian life: joy, prayer, and gratitude—the antidote for the problems outlined in the previous verses. Joy is a hallmark of true Christianity, especially in difficult circumstances. Prayer is as much about the act of praying as it is about an attitude of dependence upon God. Finally, there's gratitude. Notice that Paul doesn't say to give thanks for all circumstances but rather in all circumstances. Difficulties are best understood in the eternal perspective of Christ's return.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17

Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. - 1 Thessalonians 5:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his inspiring book, Too Soon to Quit, former MBI President, Dr. George Sweeting, includes a warm tribute to his boyhood pastor in New Jersey, Herrmann G. Braunlin. Pastor Braunlin served the Hawthorne Gospel Church for sixty-two years, impacting countless

lives by his godly example and ministry. More than a thousand people attended Pastor Braunlin's memorial service in 1995, a testimony to the love that people had for their pastor.

Many of us have been deeply influenced by a pastor, missionary, Christian club leader, campus ministry director, or some other person whose life's work was the work of Christ.

We can't do a complete study on the subject of work without taking time to consider the men and women whom God has called into His service. The Bible urges and cautions the church not to forget God's workers, because they also deserve a good return for their hard work.

When this topic comes up, most Christians think of the passages of Scripture that teach us to take care of God's workers. First Timothy 5 is one of those passages. Ever since the law of Moses, God's plan has been that His people use part of their crops or herds or income to pay those whose full-time work is serving in His house.

But there's more to it than making sure that the preacher gets a decent paycheck every week, or that the missionaries have adequate support to meet their needs. The issue of honor and respect, which was obviously of great concern to Paul, is very important.

The various churches that the apostle either established or ministered to were still in their early stages when most of the New Testament was written. Believers like those in Thessalonica and Ephesus (where Timothy served) were just getting used to the idea that some people's work was taking care of the church, and that God wanted them to support the workers He sent to them.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As Christians, we are all God's workers, since everything we do is to be done for Him.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

May God himself ... sanctify you through and through. - 1 Thessalonians 5:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

Talk-show host Dr. Laura gives her listeners "to-the-point" advice. On air, Dr. Laura unabashedly criticizes and challenges her callers, ignoring political correctness in her admonishment. Many people seem to welcome this admonition, as her show is second in popularity only to Rush Limbaugh.

What is biblical admonition? Two words in our reading from today mean "to admonish." In 1Th 5:12 it is translated as "admonish" and in 1Th 5:14 as "warn." The second translation gives a sense of how this word admonish is different from simply teach (cf. Col. 3:16). As Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary states, admonish "has mainly in view the things that are wrong and call for warning."

With yesterday's reading we began to explore how God's faithfulness impacts our sanctification. It is, in fact, the ultimate guarantee of its completion. Today's passage emphasizes this (1Th 5:23-24). But as we've already seen in past readings and as we'll see again today, this doesn't exempt us from the process. We have a role to play, not only in our own sanctification, but also for the sanctification of others. Admonishment is a tool we must wield in the body of Christ.

First, those in spiritual authority over us have the right and responsibility to warn and instruct us (1Th 5:12). They might call into question our motives, challenge us toward certain spiritual disciplines, question our interpretations of Scripture, or confront us when we choose to deliberately sin. Admonishment is not easy for our leaders to give nor for us to receive. By respecting their authority and recognizing their hard work (1Th 5:13), we can lessen our own defensiveness.

Second, everyone in the body of Christ must admonish his brothers and sisters in Christ (1Th 5:14). Our words need not be unnecessarily harsh. Instead, taking into account each person's individual situation, we can admonish by warning, encouraging, and helping. Patience and kindness should flavor all godly admonition (1Th 5:14-15).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In his book, *The Connecting Church*, Randy Frazee identifies our lack of accountability, or admonishment, in the church today. "We really don't have accountability; we only have disclosure. [Someone] is often willing to disclose personal struggles and decisions, but there usually is no invitation to challenge the choices or to hold the person accountable to an objective standard." Is this true in your Christian relationships? When was the last time you admonished someone or invited someone to admonish you?

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 COMMUNITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A popular African proverb says, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." Based on today's reading, we might suggest another: "It

takes a whole church to disciple a Christian." Community is an important value for most congregations. Many use small groups to make this a reality. But in his book *The Search to Belong*, author Joseph Myers observes that our small-group models often encourage forced belonging: "We surmise that putting people into groups will alleviate the emptiness so prevalent in our fast-paced culture." Instead, Myers suggests that we focus on creating environments that allow people naturally to connect.

Today's passage reveals some of the characteristics of this kind of healthy environment. Paul does not command a particular organizational structure. Instead, he describes a variety of actions and dispositions. They include warning, encouragement, support, patience, and kindness. The list is attractive. Who would not want to be part of a church whose culture was characterized by these traits? Yet this list also implies that the community we call "church" includes those who are lazy, timid, irritating, and who sometimes take advantage of one another.

The church we long for is an ideal church, where the worship is always meaningful and everyone gets along. The church of our experience is something else. It is not an ideal community but a kind of laboratory, where Christ allows us to experience grace and transformation within the context of real relationships. Often these relationships are strained because of sin.

The remedy Paul prescribes is multifaceted. Sometimes it calls for our courageous confrontation that holds others accountable for their actions. At other times it requires mercy and patience as we bear with one another. Either course of action must be undertaken with a sense of our own sinfulness and need for grace.

APPLY THE WORD Sometimes it helps to visualize where the spaces for relationship exist in your church. One way to do this is through creating a relational map of these spaces, and see how they are related to one another. After you have identified as many relational spaces as you can think of, label them with the various actions Paul mentions in today's reading. What does your community look like?

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. - 1 Thessalonians 5:24

TODAY IN THE WORD

Charles Spurgeon once wrote concerning God's promises: "'It is a cause of much weakness to many that they do not treat God's promises as realities. If a friend makes a promise, they regard it as a substantial thing... but the declarations of God are often viewed as words which mean very little... Rest assured [however] that the Lord never trifles with words.'"

We don't want to be guilty of discounting God's promises. He's too faithful for us to take the assurances of His Word lightly. God's dependability is one matter; our faith in His dependability is another. Spiritual benefits come to those who believe God and act on His promises.

Today's reading is a good example of this. The commands listed in 1Th 5:16-22 are part of what it means to be sanctified,

to be "'set apart'" from the world and become more like Jesus Christ. Salvation is instantaneous; we are saved the moment we believe. But sanctification, or Christian growth, is a lifelong process.

Paul had already told the Thessalonians, "'It is God's will that you should be sanctified'" (1Th 4:3). Chapters 4 and 5 go on to explain what this means in very practical, everyday terms.

We still struggle, however, to live up to the high calling we have in Christ. We're not talking about trying to keep or earn our salvation; the issue is how we should live as those who already belong to Christ.

Consider 1Th 5:16-18. There aren't many words here, but a lifetime of challenges: being joyful at all times, keeping our hearts in a constant attitude of prayer, and giving thanks for whatever comes our way.

Now add to these the following commands concerning the Holy Spirit's ministry and the importance of shunning evil. That's quite a list.

How can we do what God wants us to do--let alone be found faithful at the Lord's coming? The answer is in 1Th 5:23-24, and it rests on God's faithfulness. Paul prays for our sanctification--and then reminds us that we can do what God requires because God Himself will enable us! God gives us the Holy Spirit to empower us for holy living, and the promise of His faithful presence to keep us faithful.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Let's discuss the command for us to "'give thanks in all circumstances'" (1Th 5: 18).

This is the time of year when many of us play spiritual "'catch up'" on all the reasons we have to be thankful. As you review God's

goodness, don't forget to thank Him for the times when being thankful may have been the last thing on your mind. Even in the hardest trials, God gives us reasons to praise Him. Today, why not review His faithfulness in a difficult time and share your praise with family and friends?

1 Thessalonians 5:16-28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Our five senses give us some astonishing capabilities. We can see a candle's flame 30 miles away on a dark, clear night, and smell a single drop of perfume diffused in a three-room apartment. We can taste .04 ounce of table salt in 530 quarts of water. Our sense of touch can detect a pressure that depresses the skin .00004 inch on the face or fingertips. And we can tell where a sound is coming from even when it arrives at one ear just .0003 second before its arrival at the other ear.

If our bodies are that sensitive, how sensitive should our spirits be? According to Paul, sensitive enough to be in unbroken communion with the Holy Spirit.

That's the key to these exhortations with which the apostle closed his first letter to the Thessalonians. The need for a spirit sensitized by the Holy Spirit is obvious in the rapid-fire commands Paul delivers (1Thes 5:16-18). These verses are easy to quote, but not easy to obey.

What makes these commands difficult? The Spirit can give us joyful, prayerful and thankful hearts; but too often our attitudes are situation-driven, making us vulnerable to constantly shifting circumstances. But when our joy is in Christ, it's untouchable. When we realize that prayer is as much a state of heart as it is words, we see how we can be in constant communion with the Lord. And we can give thanks in any situation because we know God is at work to bring good from it (Rom. 8:28).

1Thes 5:19-22 are aimed at our life as a body in the church. Prophetic utterances in which the speaker delivered direct revelation from God were crucial for the early church, which did not have the full revelation of God. To disregard them out of hand was to douse the Spirit's fire.

Paul's prayer (1Thes 5:23-24) pulls together the major themes of the letter. His concern for the faithfulness of his readers is reflected in a prayer for their sanctification. And he voices his desire that they be ready for Christ's return.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY In addition to not putting out the Holy Spirit's fire, we are told not to grieve the Spirit by our words (Eph. 4:30).

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 HOPE AND JOY

The much-loved chorus of the hymn "At the Cross" declares: "At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, / And the burden of my heart rolled away. / It was there by faith I received my sight, / And now I am happy all the day." This refrain was added to Isaac Watts's hymn "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed" by Ralph Hudson because he wasn't satisfied with the conclusion of the original. Some find the sentiment of the added chorus out of step with their experience (and it changes melody from the original hymn), however, because few Christians experience constant happiness.

Paul's admonition in today's reading is not to be "happy all the day" but to "rejoice always." Is there a difference between the two? One distinction is the injunction in 1 Thessalonians 5:16 does not refer to an individual emotional state but to a corporate act. This is a call to corporate worship rather than a command to feel a certain way. What we call "happiness" is usually an emotional affect or consequence that depends upon a variety of factors resulting from circumstances that are beyond our control. The kind of rejoicing that Paul speaks of here is an act of attention. It is an expression of faith and an affirmation of God's goodness.

Rejoicing is linked with two other intentional acts in these verses. Paul also urged his church in Thessalonica to "pray continually" and "give thanks in all circumstances." Both are acts of faith, but each has a slightly different focus. In prayer we make known those things that we need or want from God. It is faith expressed in the terms of expectation. When we give thanks, we surrender to God's disposition of our circumstances. This is faith expressed in terms of submission. When we give thanks in every circumstance we acknowledge that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

APPLY THE WORD If your emotional state makes it hard to rejoice in the Lord today, use a concordance or Bible software to look up all the instances in the Psalms where the word rejoice can be found. How many different reasons or circumstances can you find? Even when we do not enjoy our circumstances, we have many reasons to rejoice in the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. - Colossians 4:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to a recent newspaper article, people are returning to the habit of praying in restaurants. The article cited a poll by the Princeton Survey Research Associates which found that sixty percent of people surveyed said they pray aloud before eating in public.

We should applaud any sign that people are practicing prayer in greater numbers. Those who regularly offer thanks for their food, no matter where they are, reveal a habit of the heart that Paul commands in these familiar verses.

But ""Pray continually"" (1Th 5:17) seems like a stretch when you read it, doesn't it? The text does not, of course, demand us to spend twenty-four hours of every day on our knees.

But in seeking God's will for us in prayer, we need to be careful not to weaken the force of Paul's words. 1Th 5:17 comes in the middle of a string of rapid-fire exhortations that help us understand his intent. We can pray continually in the same way that we can always be joyful.

We don't have to be smiling all the time to be characterized by joy. We all know people who emit joy the way the sun emits rays. They choose to live this way. The joy of Christ is the atmosphere that sustains them.

In the same way, God wants prayer to be the atmosphere we breathe, the attitude of our hearts. A person who lives in a continual attitude of prayer is someone who can give thanks in all circumstances (1Th 5:8).

Does today's text suggest anything about how much we should pray? It sure does. Giving thanks in everything by itself is going to consume a good part of your time! And in special times of need or concern, you may literally find yourself praying continually in the sense that your prayer burden is never more than a heartbeat from your conscious thoughts.

Let's face it. Praying too much isn't a big problem for most of us. It's all that we can handle just to cultivate the prayer habit that God wants of us. But we have a prayer Helper in the Holy Spirit. Let's not ""put out"" the prayer fire He wants to kindle in us.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY One way to help develop a habit of prayer is to change some of our standard thinking. For example, we usually treat the ""Amen"" at the end of our prayers like a period at the end of a sentence. In other words, prayer is over, so let's move on to the next thing. But instead of a period, try thinking of your ""amen"" as a comma--simply a pause in the conversation. You may have to go on to work or to your duties at home, but you can bring the atmosphere of your prayer place with you.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 Acts 12:1-19

Pray continually. - 1 Thessalonians 5:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Most of us don't face the threat of being killed by our neighbors just because we are Christians. But in some areas of India, believers endure exactly that risk. An Indian pastor in the state of Madhya Pradesh was threatened with "serious consequences" unless he left his village in three days. The police responded by shrugging their shoulders, and the pastor sent his family away to relatives while he recruited Christians to pray. Remarkably, the police had a sudden change of heart, agreeing to protect the pastor from violence. The threat is not gone, but the pastor has been able to continue his ministry.

Christians have faced threats and responded with prayer since the earliest days of the church, as we see in our reading today. But somehow only a servant girl was quick to believe that God had answered their prayers for protection.

Herod was trying to pacify the Jews in the region he controlled; he couldn't afford to let social unrest fester or the Romans might deprive him of his rule. He had already executed the apostle James, and Peter—considered one of the biggest prizes among the leaders of these Jesus followers—was to be next. Peter was imprisoned and guarded by sixteen men; the church was gathered together praying for him (v. 5).

God responded with a jaw-dropping miracle. Peter didn't even realize that his rescue was real until he was in the middle of the street (v. 10). He immediately went to the home of Mary, where he knew the prayer vigil was taking place. Initially, he didn't get the welcome he expected.

The servant girl Rhoda heard Peter's voice, recognized it, and was "overjoyed" with the reality that God had delivered Peter (v. 13). She ran to tell the others—forgetting to let Peter in! But the gathered believers couldn't believe that God has answered their prayer in this way; note the excuses they offer: Rhoda must be crazy ... or maybe it's Peter's angel. But Rhoda's willingness to believe that God had done something amazing was vindicated when they finally opened the door and saw Peter standing there.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Our God is not too small—but sometimes our prayers are. Do you have a prayer request that seems impossible, so you hesitate to even mention it? Perhaps you have a loved one who seems far away from God, or you can't imagine how your finances will stretch to meet your needs, or you just have a heart for oppressed people in other countries. Whatever your request, pray and ask fellow believers to pray with you. We can't predict how and when God will answer, but we can have confidence in His faithfulness to hear.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 1 Thessalonians 5:1-18

Pray continually. - 1 Thessalonians 5:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

A little more than three years ago, someone bought a ticket in the Mega-bucks lottery in Massachusetts. The number picked turned out to be the winner of \$4.6 million! Yet this person never showed up to claim their prize, and the ticket expired after one year.

The money was already there; it belonged to the person who had the right ticket, it just needed to be claimed. But he or she did nothing and so received nothing. In the same way, the treasure of prayer is already ours—it belongs to us by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ—it just needs to be claimed. Seen from this perspective, to neglect prayer is spiritual foolishness of the highest order!

When we develop a lifestyle of prayer, we tap into the inexhaustible riches of the God who sovereignly rules the universe and loves us personally. Our final reading this month is a short one with three clear points which we would do well to meditate on and allow to guide our inner lives: Always rejoice. Always pray. Always give thanks. No buts, no conditions, no exceptions. As the Nike commercials used to say, “Just do it.”

Why? Because “this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (v. 18). In our humanness, we often make the question of “finding God’s will for our lives” too complicated or subtle. Here’s a piece of it, plain and simple: Always rejoice. Always pray. Always give thanks. We should spend our lives pursuing this will of God, making choices which orient our thoughts, words, and actions to joy, prayer, and gratitude. Prayer is at the core of an intimate walk with God, and abiding there is the true and only source of lasting joy, which inevitably yields forth thankfulness for God’s blessings.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As we wrap up this month’s study of Prayer: A Life of Wisdom, take a look back at “Today Along the Way” for November 1. What personal prayer goals did you discover or did the Spirit put on your heart?

1 Thessalonians 5:22, 2 Corinthians 8:16-24

Avoid every kind of evil. - 1 Thessalonians 5:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

In an effort to protect public trust, the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) was founded in 1979. This accreditation council requires adherence to strict standards, including independent financial auditing and fundraising integrity. Thus donors are protected from unscrupulous groups, and organizations are protected from succumbing to methods that might bring dishonor to the cause of Christ. Currently over 2,000 evangelical organizations comprise the council.

Like other wise leaders, Paul knew that special care was needed when it came to money. For several years, he had been collecting funds for famine-stricken believers in Jerusalem from Gentile churches. He knew he would be the object of suspicions given the large sum of money involved. In fact, some in Corinth apparently suggested that Paul used collection funds to line his own pockets. They may have used this to justify their own failure to give.

This explains the great care that Paul took in pursuing the Corinthians' contribution to the collection. If the ECFA had been around, Paul would have met and exceeded their stringent standards! He began by appealing to faithful Titus, who had just returned from Corinth with the “tearful” letter. We get a glimpse of Titus's own deep love for the Corinthians in his enthusiasm to turn around and undertake the arduous trip back to Corinth. Although asked by Paul, it's clear that he acted of his own initiative and desire.

In addition to Titus, Paul saw the wisdom of sending several respected brothers. First, there is an unnamed brother, who had been chosen by other churches, probably in Macedonia and Greece, to ensure the propriety of the collection. There have been many suggestions concerning this individual's identity, including Luke, but what's clear from the text is that this person was highly regarded. Additionally, another brother completed the group. The designation “our brother” indicates someone close to Paul. Such an individual could vouch that Paul's hands were completely clean regarding the collection.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In addition to the need for integrity when it comes to finances, today's passage offers two other lessons for giving. First, notice the eagerness of those involved with this major fundraising drive. They understood they weren't "just asking for money," but that they were participating in God's glorious work. Second, notice how this collection crossed cultural and ethnic boundaries. Charity begins at home, but it can never stop there. The church must extend beyond itself to minister to its brothers and sisters throughout the world.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 DON'T AND DO

Some describe Christianity as a religion of do's and don'ts. But this is not entirely true. Yes, the Bible is filled with commands and prohibitions. Followers of Jesus Christ are often distinguished from those who are not by their actions. But our status as children of God is not based on personal performance. Eternal life is a gift that is received by faith and the result of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. The do's and don'ts of the Christian life are a response to this gift and an expression of our faith.

Today's reading lists several important and possibly puzzling commands and prohibitions. The first is a warning not to quench the Spirit or treat prophecies with contempt. These prohibitions are combined with a command to test everything and hold on to what is good. Taken together, these don'ts and do's describe Paul's balanced approach to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Discernment was needed to distinguish between those who genuinely spoke on God's behalf from others who spoke of their own accord (1 Cor. 14:29).

Today we have the gift of the completed canon of Scripture, which is the primary way that the Holy Spirit speaks to us. Like the Thessalonians, we have an obligation to open our hearts to the things the Spirit may be saying to us through those who proclaim God's Word.

We also have a responsibility to test what we hear. We do this by comparing what is preached to what God has revealed in the Word (cf. Deut. 13:1–4). Every believer has the Holy Spirit who helps us understand the significance of what God has revealed in the Bible (Rom. 8:9; 1 John 2:20, 27). As we give attention to God's Word, He will help us to discern between good teaching and bad. This is how we avoid "every kind of evil" (v. 22).

APPLY THE WORD - Would you like to know more about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the present age? Read John Stott's *Baptism and the Fullness: The Holy Spirit's Work Today* (IVP). To learn more about the Holy Spirit's involvement in the inspiration of Scripture, read *Inspiration and Canonicity of Scripture* by R. Laird Harris (Wipf & Stock). Both books are available online or from your Christian bookstore.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-28

God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. - 1 Corinthians 1:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

"Sometimes when we read the words of those who have been more than conquerors, we feel almost despondent. I feel that I shall never be like that. But they won through step by step, by little bits of wills, little denials of self, little inward victories, by faithfulness in very little things... No one sees these little hidden steps. They only see the accomplishment, but even so, those small steps were taken. There is no sudden triumph on spiritual maturity," once wrote Amy Carmichael, a missionary to India.

These words would have been a timely encouragement for the Thessalonians, who needed the reminder that "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

Yesterday we looked at Paul's final instructions to the Thessalonians, which concludes with the command not to quench the Spirit's fire. It's not exactly clear what Paul meant here. Perhaps there had been prophetic activity associated with the false teaching about the day of the Lord. If so, some Thessalonian believers may have resisted even legitimate prophetic gifts. Possibly a more general reference is in view; undisciplined idleness and despair over the dead would hinder one's ability to hear the Spirit. Just as John admonished believers to "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1-6), so also Paul urged caution in this regard.

Following this, Paul offered a closing benediction, underscoring that none of the preceding commands were possible apart from God, who first calls believers. God's faithfulness entails His sanctifying and preserving work in believers' lives.

We get a touching insight into the man Paul, who realized his own need for prayer. The holy kiss was most likely an affectionate kiss on the cheek that wasn't normally used outside of family. Hence, the practice in the early church visibly attested that the gospel cut across ethnic and social lines.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY As we conclude 1 Thessalonians, review the letter and make a list of those aspects of spiritual maturity

that struck you most. Perhaps you feel like Amy Carmichael: "I shall never be like that." If so, recall that the Thessalonians had only been believers for a very short time when Paul affirmed his full assurance that the Lord was faithful to complete what He had begun. At the same time, prayerfully consider the "little denials of self" and the "faithfulness in very little things" that the Holy Spirit is urging in you.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 ULTIMATE HOPE

Few words have the power to strike fear into the heart of a child like the phrase, "Wait until your father gets home!" This is something we usually hear only after we have broken the lamp or dented the car's fender. This warning has the ring of final judgment. Eventually Dad will come home, and there will be a reckoning.

For the Christian, however, the prospect of standing before our heavenly Father is much different. The apostle Paul describes final judgment as an event that we can eagerly anticipate rather than something we should dread. This is only possible because of who God is. He is the "God of peace" (v. 23). This does not refer to an inner emotional state but to the nature of our relationship with Him. God took the initiative to make peace with us by sending His Son to die and rise again for our sins. We have peace with God through Christ (Rom. 5:1).

Our peace treaty with God is more than a paper declaration. Since sin was at the root of our broken relationship, Christ's work has dealt fully with sin. The believer will be able to face God without dread on the Day of Judgment because each one has been made blameless through the work of Jesus. And verse 23 promises more than forgiveness of sin. It describes a complete transformation, a purification "through and through."

In the Christian life, holiness is a gift before it is a practice. We must be made holy before we can live holy lives. We can depend upon God to finish the work that He has begun in us. The God who has made peace with us through Christ will enable us to stand before Him without shame or fear. This truth is what allows us to have hope, both in God's work in our lives today and in the salvation He has promised in the future.

APPLY THE WORD Can you honestly say that you are looking forward to final judgment? If you are uncertain about how you will fare on that day, it may be an indication that you do not know where you stand with Christ. If you are uncertain call (800) DL MOODY and someone will be happy to share how you can know today that you have peace with God.

1 Thessalonians 5:25-28 MUTUAL HOPE

Many churches post greeters at the door to welcome visitors. This ministry usually involves a smile, a handshake, and some expression of appreciation for attending. How would you feel if next Sunday the greeter welcomed you with a kiss instead of a handshake? Paul describes kissing as an appropriate form of Christian greeting in four of his letters (see Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26). Peter echoes this command (1 Peter 5:14).

In his book *Ancient Christian Worship*, Andrew B. McGowan observes, "Membership in the Christian community brought believers into a relationship like that of family members, although no one precedent or model explains the prominence of Christians' kissing. It was a reworking of an existing practice or convention, for the new purposes of a genuinely new social grouping." By the middle of the second century, kissing was a feature of the church's liturgy of worship, linked with prayer and the observance of the Lord's Supper. The kiss was a social formality but was intended to convey important spiritual truths about the relationship believers have with one another.

Paul's closing commands in this letter emphasize mutuality. The Thessalonians had certainly benefited from Paul's ministry, but he was also dependent upon them for prayer. The church's "holy kiss" was a tangible reminder of the bond that knits all believers together. The command that this letter should be read to all underscored Paul's apostolic authority as well as the church's responsibility to be a community under the Word.

In many of today's churches, the function of a greeter is to make visitors welcome. They send a message of invitation to those who are not yet a part of the church. In the ancient church, the holy kiss was a sign to those who were already in the community.

APPLY THE WORD The early church adapted the practice of kissing to communicate something about relationships in the church. In addition to a warm handshake and friendly greeting, can you think of other ways your church can make people feel welcome and demonstrate the bond shared in Christ? Perhaps inviting someone to share coffee or lunch after a service could extend Christian hospitality and love.

1 Thessalonians 5:26 Acts 21:1-36

Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. - 1 Thessalonians 5:26

TODAY IN THE WORD

In February 2006, a White House report praised faith-based organizations for their response to Hurricane Katrina. A section entitled "What Went Right" listed several examples, including 6,000 Southern Baptist Relief volunteers from 36 states who set up mobile kitchens and shelters; Operation Blessing which provided food, shelter, and grants of \$4 million; and Christ in Action which repaired over 500 houses.

This outpouring of aid gives some insight into Paul's desire to help the Jerusalem church. He not only longed to see financially stable churches help financially needy ones, he also desired unity between Gentile and Jewish believers. This explains his urgency to go to Jerusalem.

Having arrived in Tyre, the team "sought" out disciples, suggesting that Paul and the others knew that a church existed in Tyre, but didn't personally know any believers there. Notice how close these two groups of believers became in one week!

Next, the group stopped in Caesarea. Although Philip's daughters were prophetesses, it was Agabus who warned Paul of what lay ahead in Jerusalem. The Spirit was graciously preparing Paul for the suffering that he would experience and had so warned him on numerous previous occasions. Thus, it seems that the well-intentioned believers in Tyre went beyond the Spirit's warning by urging Paul not to go (Acts 21:4).

Once in Jerusalem, Paul was warmly received, as was the financial gift from the Gentile churches. The Jerusalem church's request of Paul and his willingness to comply shows how earnestly both James and Paul desired unity between believers.

Ironically, just when Paul was demonstrating compliance with Jewish law, fanatical Jews falsely accused him of violating those very laws. Persuaded that Paul had defiled the temple, this mob would have killed him if not for the Roman commander. The shouts of "Away with him!" eerily echoed a similar mob who had shouted "Crucify Him!" about 25 years earlier.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

William Barclay once said, "The man who is in the family of the church has friends all over the world." We see this demonstrated in Acts 21. Everywhere Paul and his team went, they were encouraged by Christian fellowship. We need to make genuine fellowship a priority, despite busy schedules and seemingly endless to-do lists. Take some time this week to touch base with a brother or sister in Christ. Ask the Spirit to show you whom you might invite over to your home or out to lunch after church this Sunday.