



TODAY IN THE WORD™

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

LIVING IN LIGHT

OF CHRIST'S RETURN

1 and 2 Thessalonians

MAY 2021

Surprised by His Coming

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

“Many in our world today are spiritually asleep at the wheel . . . even Christians.”



If you've ever been the driver on a long road trip, you know what it means to be lulled to sleep by the hum of your car. Your eyelids get

heavy. Your body deceives you, saying, "Rest." Then, suddenly, you jolt awake as your tires hit the side of the road. Adrenaline surges and you think, *That was close!* Maybe, like me, you roll down the window, to let the cold air wake you up. We do whatever it takes to stay awake because we know falling asleep would be disaster.

That's the same exhortation the apostle Paul gives the church. We may be tempted to sleep, to get comfortable in our faith. But, Paul warns: "So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober" (1 Thess. 5:6).

Many in our world today are spiritually asleep at the wheel . . . even Christians. We are allowing ourselves to be lured into a nap by the lullabies of this world. Rather than spending time in God's Word, we become consumed by carnality and sinful practices. In his letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul urges Christians to

wake up and live with expectancy of the Lord's return, saying it will be like a "thief in the night" (v. 2).

As Christ followers, we must make every effort to stay awake and aware, anticipating what is to come. We act differently than the world because we are expecting the return of Jesus. Paul compares spiritual wakefulness to preparing for a battle, describing the things we need to "put on": faith, love, and hope (v. 8). Faith reminds us that we cannot live for what we touch and see, but for what God has promised. Love, given to us by God, should overflow to those around us. Hope reminds us that although life may be tough, suffering is not a part of our eternal existence. The more we suffer in this life, the sweeter the coming of Jesus becomes.

I am thankful this battle does not depend solely on us; God is at work, in and through us. Paul ends his first letter, and I end this column, with these words of encouragement: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (vv. 23–24). ■

Keeping the End in View

by Dr. John Koessler

“The outcome is certain. Jesus will return. Satan will be defeated. Those who are Christ’s “will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Have you ever looked at the state of our world and wondered if the end is near? In Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, one of the themes is *eschatology* or the study of the events leading up to Christ’s return. The apostle corrects misconceptions about several teachings, including “the day of the Lord.”

The “day of the Lord” appears around 100 times in Scripture to describe a time of divine judgment. It does not refer to one specific day but to a series of events. The particular judgment Paul discusses in 2 Thessalonians is “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jer. 30:7), a period of worldwide tribulation marked by the rise of the Antichrist.

The spirit of deceit that will mark the Antichrist’s teaching is already at work in the world. It is the spirit behind all false teachers and so-called messiahs who attempt to deceive the church and influence people (1 John 4:3). When the Antichrist appears, he will demand worship and deceive many with signs and wonders, and then Christ will come (2 Thess. 2:4).

Christians differ in their understanding of the timing of some of the events surrounding Christ’s return. But Jesus warned His disciples not to concern themselves with “times or dates” (Acts 1:7). We can be certain of three facts. First, Jesus will come and gather the church to Himself (2 Thess. 2:1). Some in the church were afraid they had missed this event. Paul assured them that this gathering was still to come (1 Thess. 4:13–18). Second, the apostle makes it clear that the Antichrist must come before Jesus returns. Christians do not need to speculate about his identity. They only need to know that he will exalt himself over God and that he is “doomed to destruction” (2 Thess. 2:3–4). Third, the outcome is certain. Jesus will return. Satan will be defeated. Those who are Christ’s “will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:17).

As for us, we do not need to know specific details about times and seasons to “encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess. 4:18). The one thing we need to know is that our future is secure in Christ. ■

For Further Study

To learn more, read *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* by Paul Benware (Moody).

Go Deeper

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

In what ways has the gospel transformed your life? (see May 3)

How can Christ's return be both surprising and expected at the same time? (see May 15)

In what ways can we participate in the spread of the gospel? (see May 28)

How does studying Christ's Second Coming impact your daily spiritual walk?

Want more questions? Check out the Go Deeper section on our website or app!

TODAY IN THE WORD™

Living in Light of Christ's Return

*Our gospel came to you not simply with words
but also with power. — 1 Thessalonians 1:5*

There are times in our lives that we'd rather forget. For many, that list might include the year 2020 with all of its challenges. But honestly, I won't be sad to put my entire life on earth in the rearview mirror, because I'm looking forward to eternity with Christ—come, Lord Jesus! Until that day, as I've learned from Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians, we must walk as children of light, living witnesses to the transforming power of the gospel.

My prayer is that through this study we will:

- Understand the background, purposes, and themes of 1 and 2 Thessalonians
- Rejoice in the person- and world-transforming power of the gospel
- Be spurred to live God-pleasing lives in light of Christ's return

Your devotional writer,



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Dear Thessalonians

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1

Grace and peace to you.—Thessalonians 1:1

A hub of political and economic power. People known for idol worship. Welcome to Thessalonica, the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. This month we'll begin by reading Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, probably written from Corinth in about 51 A.D., during Paul's second missionary journey.

The bustling city of Thessalonica had a population as high as 200,000. Located at the intersection of major trade routes, it boasted one of the best harbors on the Aegean Sea. People in the city worshiped Greco-Roman gods and some Egyptian gods, as well as the emperor (Caesar). Many of these religions included acts of sexual immorality among their rituals.

Paul and his team had planted the Thessalonian church, which included some Jews but was mainly made up of Gentiles. He'd only been able to stay in the city a few months because active Jewish resistance to the gospel had forced him out of town (Acts 17:1–9). Paul is clearly identified as

the author of this letter (1 Thess. 1:1). Silas and Timothy are named as fellow missionaries. Timothy had apparently just visited Paul with a good report about the Thessalonians (3:6–8), and would likely have carried this epistle back to them.

Paul knew the Thessalonian church needed more teaching than he'd been able to give in his short time there. Therefore, his purpose in writing this letter was—within the larger context of Christ's Second Coming—to encourage the young church to stand firm and keep growing, to give further instruction on godly living, and to reassure them that one day all believers will be raised to eternal life. Additional themes of the book include the transforming power of the gospel, righteousness, suffering, and the end times.

► We encourage you to begin this month's study by reading the first of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians in one sitting. Worried about time? It will take you at most 10–15 minutes!

Pray with Us

Dear God, thank you for the teaching we have access to in your Word. Thank you for mature leaders like Paul and Silas whose lives and teaching point us to you.

Thankful Remembrances

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2–3

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.—1 Thessalonians 1:2

Gratitude helps build community. That's why California educator Mike Fauteux built an online tool to promote more gratitude in schools. Called GiveThx, this app provides a way for students to write thank-you notes to each other. Teachers can even start "gratitude waves" aimed at particular students who might need extra encouragement.

Paul remembered his Thessalonian friends with thankfulness to the Lord (v. 2). Specifically, his prayers focused on their "work produced by faith," their "labor prompted by love," and their "endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 3). Faith, hope, and love are often mentioned together in Paul's epistles (see 1 Cor. 13:13). Here these qualities are treated as causes and paired with effects. That is, faith leads to work or good deeds (Eph. 2:8–10; James 2:14–17), love leads to labor for the Lord, and hope in Christ's return leads to endurance or perseverance through difficulties and persecution.

Paul was thankful that these causes and effects were true in the lives of the Thessalonians. He prayed that this would become even more true as the church continued to mature. The verb "remember" is more substantial in Greek and Hebrew than in English. Biblical remembering is not merely the mental activity of recalling something. It includes action. For example, when God said to Noah, "I will remember," it means He will keep His promise (Gen. 9:12–17). When we are told, "Remember your Creator," it means we should worship and obey God throughout our entire lives (Eccl. 12:1–7). So when Paul said, "We remember," it means that in addition to praying for them, he stood by, ready to help them grow in discipleship. How? By writing this letter.

► Who can you remember today? We can remember others by consistently lifting them up to the Lord in prayer. And consider how your "remembrances" can be accompanied by concrete godly actions.

Pray with Us

Lord, as we remember those you have placed on our hearts, stoke our faith into works on their behalf, stir our love into service, and strengthen our hope into prayerful endurance.

The Life-Changing Gospel

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:4–10

You became a model to all the believers.—1 Thessalonians 1:7

Welsh missionary Timothy Richard arrived in China in 1870. For 45 years, he preached the gospel; distributed Scripture and Christian literature; organized famine relief; and founded schools, orphanages, and training programs. When this faithful servant died in 1919, he was recognized as one of the most influential missionaries in church history.

For missionaries, success is measured by the transforming power of the gospel. Paul rejoiced that the gospel had been warmly received by the Thessalonians and had a transforming impact (v. 5). The evidence of their saving faith could be seen in how dramatically they'd changed: They'd turned from pagan idols and trusted Christ alone (v. 9). They'd rejected their pagan lifestyle and become imitators of Paul and his team, and thus of Christ (v. 6). They'd joyfully stood fast even when their beliefs led to "severe suffering."

In fact, these men and women had become a model for believers throughout the region (v. 7). The

clarity of their witness was like a bell—"the Lord's message rang out from you" (v. 8). They did all this while waiting expectantly for the return of Christ. He "rescues us from the coming wrath" (v. 10), that is, the Tribulation, as we learn later.

Ultimately, the gospel was proclaimed and had power because of God (v. 4). There was no reason for the Thessalonians to feel prideful. God had chosen them for His own sovereign purposes. This contrasted with the false gods of Thessalonica, who did not love their worshippers. The relationship was rather one of appeasing and granting favors. Just as the believers' transformed lives testified to their saving faith in Christ, then, they also testified to God's unique love and sovereign election.

► Have you trusted in Christ for salvation (Acts 16:31)? If not, we encourage you to take this decisive step today. If yes, rejoice with us in the love and power of our Savior! Together, we live faithfully, in expectation of His return!

Pray with Us

New believers and veterans alike, we all rejoice in God's power to save. Lord, transform us like you did the Thessalonians. Make your grace and power clear in our lives so that all may see!

Pleasing God Alone

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1–7

We are not trying to please people but God.—1 Thessalonians 2:4

Whom are you trying to please: people or God? In their commentary on 1 Thessalonians, John F. Walvoord and Mark Hitchcock wrote: “The most basic test of any service rendered for God is the question, ‘Is it pleasing to Him?’ Our little houses of self-praise and self-gratification tumble in a moment when we stop to consider, ‘What does God think about it?’ . . . Paul was energized and propelled by a burning desire to please God. Certainly this is a standard to challenge every thoughtful Christian.”

When he preached the gospel in Thessalonica, Paul was not trying to win human approval or admiration: “You know how we lived among you for your sake” (1 Thess. 1:5). He’d arrived after an unjust imprisonment and miraculous liberation in Philippi, and despite opposition in Thessalonica as well he’d continued faithfully proclaiming the gospel (2:1–2; Acts 16:16–17:9).

The paramount motivation of Paul and his team was to please God

alone (1 Thess. 2:4). Based on this governing purpose, they didn’t preach falsehoods with impure motives nor did they use deceptive rhetoric or techniques (v. 3). They were not greedy for monetary gain; they did not flatter their listeners or seek to inflate their own egos (vv. 5–6). Then as now, the integrity of the preacher goes hand-in-glove with the message!

Instead, Paul and his fellow missionaries viewed their calling as from the Lord. They’d been *entrusted* with the gospel. None of this was about them! Ultimately their work and motivations would be approved by God (v. 4). Rather than exercise Paul’s legitimate apostolic authority to ask for financial support (v. 6), they “were like young children among you,” that is, they took a low social position in obedience to Christ (v. 7). God Himself could witness to the veracity of these claims (v. 5).

► It can be easy to fall into the trap of seeking to please people. What would the Lord find if He examined your heart in this area today?

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, we often live as if other people have the power to condemn or approve us, when only you have that authority. Forgive us! Plant in us a single purpose—to live in a manner pleasing to you.

Caring for Others

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:7–12

We were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.—1 Thessalonians 2:8

Any new parent will agree that caring for a newborn baby is an act of selfless love. The newborn baby relies completely on parents to meet its needs for food, physical closeness, and safety, while the little one mostly eats, sleeps, cries, and fills diaper after diaper. This can be exhausting, but parents persist because they love the new life that has been entrusted to their care.

This is how Paul pictured the initial relationship between his team and the Thessalonians. Though in terms of social status the missionaries had been like “young children,” spiritually they were the parents of the fledgling church. Like a mother caring for her newborn with gentle love, they’d fed and protected the baby believers in their early days of faith (vv. 7–8). Like a father teaching and encouraging his children toward right character and behavior, they’d instructed and exhorted the Thessalonians as they took their first steps on the pilgrimage to Christlikeness (vv. 11–12).

Paul and his team had no selfish ulterior motives. They’d shared the gospel and their lives in an authentic manner (v. 8). They’d worked hard so they wouldn’t be a burden to the young church and so their motives couldn’t be criticized or misunderstood (v. 9). They certainly didn’t want to be confused with traveling secular orators, who in that day exercised their skills for praise and profit. And they didn’t do these things grudgingly, but with delight! As we also read yesterday (v. 5), God Himself could bear witness to their blameless conduct—and if they were honest, so could the Thessalonians (v. 10).

The essential goal for both the missionaries and the Thessalonians was “to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (v. 12; see also 1 Thess. 1:4).

► Salvation is more than a moment or a “sinner’s prayer.” It’s a process or a journey of growing toward Christlike perfection (James 1:2–4). Thank God for His faithfulness in this!

Pray with Us

Father, we thank you for your continual work in our hearts and minds; our growth is entirely due to your kindness. We thank you for the men and women who have served you by investing in our spiritual growth.

Suffering for Christ

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16

The word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.—1 Thessalonians 2:13

When Paul arrived in Thessalonica, he presented the gospel first to Jews in the local synagogue, as he often did. Some believed, but others responded with hostility, stirring up mob violence and driving the apostle out of the city. When he moved on to Berea, they followed him there and did the same, although many of the “more noble” Berean Jews trusted Christ (Acts 17:1-14).

This is one reason why Paul wrote specifically about persecution by the Jews in today’s reading. The Thessalonians had responded positively to the gospel, for which Paul was thankful. They’d accepted the good news in faith not as a merely human phenomenon but as the living and powerful word of God. As such, it was “indeed at work in you who believe” (v. 13; see also Heb. 4:12). As a result, the believers in Thessalonica had become a model for churches throughout the province of Macedonia (1 Thess. 1:7–8).

All this was true despite persecution (2:14–16). Just as the

Judean churches endured suffering at the hands of the Jews, so also did the new Thessalonian church endure suffering at the hands of their fellow Gentiles. Paul’s Jewish enemies were likely behind this, as they’d been earlier (Acts 17:5–9, 13). They weren’t content to stop at rejecting the gospel themselves: They worked actively to block the Gentiles from even hearing it, and thus, “they always heap up their sin to the limit” (v. 16).

Even so, Paul didn’t hate his fellow Jews—far from it. Though he faced their failures and sins squarely, he loved them dearly and longed for them to be saved (Rom. 10:1–4). The Thessalonians could take comfort from the fact that their suffering wasn’t unique. Other believers had also been persecuted, and yet God would always triumph!

► The Thessalonian church looked to the Judean churches as a model to imitate (1 Thess. 2:14). In the same way, mentoring relationships between older and younger believers are key in today’s church.

Pray with Us

We want to bless others as you have blessed us, Lord. Grant us mentors to train us in your wisdom and give us opportunities to disciple others. We ask also for humility; never let our pride inhibit your work.

Longing to See You Again

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:5

You are our glory and joy.—1 Thessalonians 2:20

Picture for a moment those first moments of a family reunion. The entire extended family is reunited—aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces, and others. They may come from around the country or even fly in from overseas. They have not seen each other in person for a very long time, so the hugs are warm and the greetings joyful. At last, they're together again!

In a similar sense, Paul had an “intense longing” to see the Thessalonians (v. 17). They were like family to him. He'd already spoken of himself as both mother and father to the young church (vv. 7–8, 11–12). Now he referred to their separation with the word “orphaned,” which in Greek can mean not only children who've lost their parents but also parents who've lost their children.

Paul felt this way because the Thessalonians represented “our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes. . . . Indeed, you are our glory and joy” (vv. 19–20).

In other words, when Christ returns and asks Paul, “How did you spend your life?”—he would point straight to the Thessalonians. They would be his “crown,” a reference to a prize in athletic games such as the ancient Olympics (Phil. 3:14). They would serve as evidence that Paul had lived faithfully for the glory of God.

Paul had gone on to Berea and then to Athens, stopping eventually in Corinth (1 Thess. 3:1). Since he couldn't come himself, he sent Timothy to Thessalonica (3:2–5). His encouraging message: Don't be “unsettled” or discouraged by persecution. In fact, he'd told them to expect trials as the normal lot of the Christian in a hostile world. They should stand firm and not give in to temptations to abandon the hard road of faith.

► Among other consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant barriers to being together. This difficult situation reminds us to give even more thanks for God's faithful fellowship (Deut. 31:8)!

Pray with Us

In periods of isolation we draw closer to you, Father. We recognize that we need your fellowship more than anyone's. Help us to live in awareness of your presence in our lives.

A Good Report

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6–10

Now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.—1 Thessalonians 3:8

My family, to be honest, is not always thankful. We have to work at it. One year, we wrote on slips of paper and filled a jar with things for which we were thankful. Some years, we keep a weekly gratitude journal to remind us of God's blessings, large or small. Last year, we tried something new: we collaborated to create a Google Jamboard (a virtual bulletin board) of photographs and good memories from 2020.

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know how thankful he was for the good report Timothy had brought about them. As we read yesterday, he desired to visit but had been blocked by Satan from doing so (1 Thess. 2:18). Instead, Paul sent Timothy. Had they been misled? Had they been derailed? Had Paul's ministry been in vain? Not at all! Timothy had brought good news about their faith and love (3:6). He'd reported that far from being overcome by suffering, they were persevering and growing in the Lord. Paul felt tremendously encouraged by this news (vv. 7–8)!

Figuratively, it was as though part of him had died while worrying about what was happening in Thessalonica. Timothy's good news revived him—"now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord." As well as showing emotion, these words also showed that Paul was spiritually encouraged: His suffering was worth it. The ministry of the gospel was moving forward.

All this led naturally to renewed thankfulness by Paul (v. 9). He rejoiced to know for sure that the Thessalonians were doing well spiritually. He still longed to see them in person (v. 10), not only for the sake of their friendship but also for him to be able to "supply what is lacking in your faith," that is, continue to teach and disciple them toward Christian maturity.

► We all experience both positive and negative emotions. It's part of life, including the spiritual life. As the Psalms demonstrate, expressing our emotions to God can be a healthy part of our relationship with Him.

Pray with Us

Lord, you understand the human experience because you have lived it yourself. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses" (Heb. 4:15). Teach us to bring our emotions to you in prayer.

A Blessing and a Prayer

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other.—1 Thessalonians 3:12

When I was a child, pastoral prayers were a main feature of our church worship service. When the prayer began, I knew to settle in for a long one. Over the years, it seems that pastoral prayers have diminished in length and prominence or even been eliminated altogether. But now, as an adult, I appreciate the way this tradition made prayer a central and important part of the service.

Paul paused several times in this letter to express pastoral prayers and blessings for the Thessalonians. This became customary in his other epistles as well. Today's mid-letter prayer and blessing well reflects this book's key theme of spiritual growth in light of Christ's return. It also reflects Paul's passionately pastoral heart for these young believers.

His first prayer request is no surprise—that the way would be cleared for him to return to Thessalonica (v. 11). He invoked the first and second Persons of the Trinity to indicate the serious and sacred nature of his petition.

His second prayer request is also a blessing—that God would cause their love to overflow within the church and beyond (v. 12). This is the horizontal dimension of the Christian life, how we're to treat one another. Paul would have more to say about this soon (see 1 Thess. 4:9–12).

His third prayer request is another blessing—that Christ would strengthen their hearts as they continued to endure suffering (v. 13). This is not about stoicism, but rather a truth of sanctification. The goal of their present lives was to be found blameless and holy when Christ returned. On that day their sanctification would be complete! This is the vertical dimension of the Christian life, how the Lord works within us (Phil. 1:6). Paul would also have more to say about this in the next chapter (see 1 Thess. 4:1–8).

► Can you personalize the prayers of verses 12–13 from today's reading? Try replacing the words "your" and "you" with your name. Then, try writing out a prayer of your own.

Pray with Us

Almighty God, cause our love for one another to overflow; strengthen our hearts to be blameless and holy in your presence when your Son returns. How we long for the day when you complete our sanctification!

Living to Please God Alone

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8

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

Following Jesus should impact every area of our life. It changes the way we work and how we spend our money. It shapes the way we treat our neighbors, and the way we address conflict in our own homes and marriages. But in this portion of Paul's letter, he addresses a topic that may not always be talked about in the church: sexuality.

Here Paul speaks frankly and strongly against all forms of sexual immorality. He did so in part because sex played a large role in pagan religions in Thessalonica. But he also did so because sexual purity is an important part of holiness in general. As Paul did (1 Thess. 2:4), we should live to please God alone—and God is perfectly holy and righteous. The apostle had wanted to teach the Thessalonians more about the Christian life, and although he couldn't do so in person, he could write this letter (vv. 1–2).

Human sexuality was a key area of temptation for the Thessalonians because sexual purity or faithfulness

was not a prevailing moral standard in that culture. Unlike the pagans, Christian believers were to avoid all forms of sexual immorality (vv. 3–6). If they could not control their own bodies, they would be slaves to their “passionate lust” or desires. If they acted on these selfish and out-of-control desires, they would hurt others. That is to say, committing sexual impurity might mean committing violence against a brother or sister in Christ.

God's will for them, by contrast, was that they should be sanctified and live holy lives (vv. 3, 7). This included acting with self-control and honor in regard to their own bodies, and with holiness and love in regard to others. This aren't merely human standards, but God's commands (v. 8; see also 1 Cor. 6:18–20).

► Sexuality can also be an area of challenge for today's Christian. Compare today's attitudes and problems with those facing the Thessalonians. How is it similar? What is different?

Pray with Us

Much has changed since Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, but we still live in a sex-saturated culture. Lord, help us live according to your holy standards, regardless of what our society permits or promotes.

Loving One Another

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9–10

You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.—1 Thessalonians 4:9

Philadelphia is known as the “City of Brotherly Love.” The motto references the Greek word *phileo* which means “brotherly love” or the love between friends. Christians revolutionized the way this term was used. In Paul’s day, the word was used only to reference actual family relationships. Only Christians called one another “brother” or “sister” when it wasn’t literally true.

Loving one another is an essential part of Christian discipleship and pleasing the Lord. One might say that living to please the Lord is the vertical dimension of the greatest commandment, while loving one another is the horizontal dimension (see Matt. 22:37–39). In yesterday’s reading, sexual immorality was condemned as sinful in part because it involved harming a brother or sister in Christ (1 Thess. 4:6). In other words, Christian love is our best defense against the temptation to give in to lust and other selfish desires.

Paul encouraged the Thessalonians by recognizing that

they’d been doing very well in the area of loving one another (vv. 9–10). In fact, they had earned a reputation throughout the region for this virtue (see 1 Thess. 1:8). Since Paul and his team had been forced to leave, the apostle concluded that the young church had been “taught by God” Himself! God would accomplish His will for the Thessalonians despite pagan hostility and persecution and despite the absence of His chosen missionaries.

So they could now rest on their laurels, right? No. As is true so often in the Christian life, the reward for faithfulness is more opportunities to be faithful. So Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to grow “more and more” in love (v. 10). We’ve already noted that sanctification is progressive—spiritual growth should be ongoing!

► Today, identify a specific act of Christian love that you can do for a specific brother or sister in Christ. If you’re unsure, pray about who and what. Then, make plans to act on it!

Pray with Us

Grant us more and more opportunities to be faithful, Father. Grant us ever-deepening love for you and for others, and opportunities to demonstrate our love in ways that glorify you.

Living with Integrity

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life.—1 Thessalonians 4:11

While many people associate success with accumulating wealth or prestige, one woman had a different type of dream. After years of being unhappy in her high-pressure, prestigious government job, she sold her suburban home and moved to the country. Her ambition? To open a farm stand. For her, living a quieter, simpler life held the greatest reward.

In today's passage, Paul discusses the virtues of hard work and living a life of quiet integrity. This is actually a further extension of the virtue of loving one another (see yesterday's devotional). Paul, for example, had shown love by working hard so as not to be a burden on the young church (1 Thess. 2:9). He'd not been too proud to work with his hands, and neither should they be.

A "quiet life" does not necessarily mean moving to the country. It can be described as taking care of one's own responsibilities (4:11), as opposed to meddling in others' affairs. Such a person is peaceable and respectful of others, not someone who stirs up

trouble. An ethic of individual integrity in this sense does not contradict the community-oriented and interdependent nature of the church. Rather, both are true simultaneously.

This godly ambition produces two outcomes (v. 12). First, such a life wins the respect of outsiders and therefore aids Christian witness to a watching world. Second, self-reliance or not being dependent on others is a virtue in itself. Sometimes we all need help, and we're commanded to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), but idleness and taking advantage of others displeases the Lord.

Why was this reminder needed? It seems some Thessalonian believers were living off the charity of wealthy church members. Whatever the case, they didn't take this hint to heart and Paul had to address this problem more sternly in his next epistle (see 2 Thess. 3:6–12).

► Today, consider your own work-life balance. What is your personal ambition? How does this passage challenge you?

Pray with Us

Lord, please prevent us from sabotaging our witness by loathing our earthly responsibilities. Teach us to worship you even in the most mundane details and duties.

Resurrection Day

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14

We believe that Jesus died and rose again. —1 Thessalonians 4:14

African American poet James Weldon Johnson depicted Death as God’s servant in his poem “Go Down Death: A Funeral Sermon.” In the poem a woman was dying, and God summoned Death to liberate her soul and bring her to heaven to be in His presence. The pastoral voice in the poem admonishes the rest of us: “Weep not—weep not, / She is not dead; / She’s resting in the bosom of Jesus.”

Death is not the end! Those of us who trust Jesus as our Savior will one day be resurrected to spend eternity with Him! Our faith is founded upon His resurrection (v. 14). This is not a warm, fuzzy, abstract truth. Jesus rose from the dead—literally and bodily—and so will we. When He returns, “God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Sleep here is a euphemism or metaphor for death, a comparison implying a future awakening.

The Thessalonians apparently thought they had to be alive when

Christ returned in order to go to heaven. Perhaps they thought—or were tempted to think—that believers who died were gone forever and had missed their chance. In this they would have been influenced by their culture, which did not believe in an afterlife. Death had to be grieved without hope (v. 13).

Christians, on the other hand, believe that death entered the world through sin, both of which have been conquered by our Lord and Savior. The hope of resurrection is at the heart of our faith (1 Cor. 15:12–20)! We grieve, but not without hope, and in truth, the sorrow is not for those who are “away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8) but for those of us who remain behind and are missing them.

► In what specific ways is Christian grief over death different from that of the world? You might reflect on funeral services you’ve attended in church versus secular contexts.

Pray with Us

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). We who love you pray for those who do not know you. Loving heavenly Father, use their despair to drive them to you and give them the hope of salvation.

Christ Will Return

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18

The Lord himself will come down from heaven.—1 Thessalonians 4:16

The “Day of the Lord” is portrayed in Scripture as a day of fear and trembling, justice and judgment. On that day, God will come as a Mighty Warrior and conquer the nations (Joel 2:1–11; Zeph. 1:14–16). The Day of the Lord is a recurring theme in Old Testament prophecy. And we know from the New Testament that this term can specifically refer to the Second Coming of Christ, when He will return as King (1 Thess. 5:2; Matt. 24:30–31; Phil. 2:9–11).

Paul taught in today’s passage about Christ’s return and the Rapture of the church. After affirming the doctrine of resurrection, he anticipated the Thessalonians’ next question: How and when will this happen? And what about those who are still alive at that time? Christ’s return will be heralded by the voice of an archangel and the trumpet call of God (v. 16). At our Lord’s “loud command . . . the dead in Christ will rise first.” By “first,” Paul meant they would be raised before dead unbelievers destined for judgment.

As for living believers, “we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17; see also 1 Cor. 15:51–52). This event is known as the Rapture and will take place prior to the Tribulation. Why do we call it the “Rapture”? The Greek term *harpazo*—translated “caught up”—means “to snatch or take away suddenly.” The language implies that Christ’s return is imminent and could happen at any time. This is exactly what the term “Rapture” (from the Latin *raptus*) means.

From that point on, believers will live with Christ forever! (v. 17; see John 14:1–3). The application of this sermon is easy: “Encourage one another with these words” (v. 18). Christ’s return is indeed our “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).

► As we dig into this end times teaching, you may find it is beneficial to read other relevant Scripture passages. Today, we invite you to read Matthew 24.

Pray with Us

Lord, teach us to live in conscious expectation of your return, not as a distant promise but as an impending reality. Let us approach our problems and ambitions with an eternal perspective.

Questions & Answers

by Dr. Winfred O. Neely,
Vice President and Dean of Moody Theological Seminary

Q Will some people (souls) live forever in heaven?

A Yes, regenerate believers in Christ will, but more must be said here. Physical death is not the end of existence, but a door that the regenerate human soul and spirit goes through to enter the greater experience of life in God's immediate presence (John 11:25).

Today, in this physical world, the regenerate follower of Christ is away from his or her true home (2 Cor. 5:6). When a Christ follower dies, that person (soul and spirit) immediately goes home, to be in the presence of God and Christ. Even though disembodied, the believer will be in full conscious fellowship and enjoyment of the triune God (Phil. 1:23).

However, at the resurrection, the Lord Jesus will reunite the soul and spirit of His departed saints with their glorified physical bodies (1 Cor. 15:50–58; Rom. 8:23; Phil. 3:20–21). The glorification and reuniting of the soul and spirit with the physical body will occur simultaneously, in a time span that the Bible calls “the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52). We will be set free from the presence of indwelling sin forever! The follower of Christ

will then live in the unhindered power of the Spirit with a sinless glorified body for all eternity. To that I say, “Hallelujah!”

Q Will some people (souls) live forever in hell?

A Sadly, when an unsaved person dies, that person's soul and spirit goes immediately to Hades (Luke 16:23; Matt. 11:23). Please note, dear reader, that I take no pleasure in writing about this. Hades is a place of torment, a kind of jail where the unsaved dead are kept until the resurrection and the judgment (John 5:27–29).

At the Great White Throne judgment (Rev. 20:11–15), the Lord Jesus will summon the dead, the lost from every period of human history, the small and great, the rich and poor, the powerful and weak. This judicial summons will raise them back to life with bodies suited for eternal punishment (John 5:28–29). As resurrected embodied persons, they will give accounts of themselves before the judgment throne. With the eternal horror of their names being absent from the Book of Life, they will receive their eternal sentence and they will be cast literally and bodily into the lake of fire (Hell) forever.

“Physical death is not the end of existence, but a door that the regenerate human soul and spirit goes through to enter the greater experience of life in God’s immediate presence.”

Readers, this is not a joke or merely a bit of trivia in a “question and answer column.” This is a matter of eternal life and eternal death. If you are reading this column and have not received Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, I plead with you to repent, turn from your sins and trust Christ before it is too late. If you have not received Jesus as your Savior and would like to talk with someone, please call 1-888-NEED HIM.

Q Who wrote the Genesis account of creation?

A The Book of Genesis is part of a larger collection of divinely inspired (2 Tim. 3:16–17) foundational biblical documents collectively known as the Torah or the Law. Included in the Torah are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Moses is known to us as the human writer of these first five books of the Bible. Both the Old Testament (Josh. 1:7–8, 8:30–31, 23:6; Ezra 6:18, 7:6) and the New Testament (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:46–47) affirm the Mosaic authorship of the Law, the first five Books of the Bible.

Q Why does there seem to be two creation accounts in the Book of Genesis?

A Genesis 1:1–2:3 and Genesis 2:4–25 are not two different accounts of creation, but two angles on the single act. The first account, in Genesis 1:1–2:3, focuses on God the Almighty. God is mentioned 35 times, each highlighting His omnipotence and wisdom. This opening section zooms in on God’s omnipotence and rule as He speaks, creates, evaluates, and brings the entire universe into existence out of nothing. The Almighty, who prepares a home for human beings on earth, says: I love you! I created the world for you!

In chapter 2:4–25, the narrator describes creation from another angle, designating God as the LORD God. The narrator uses the LORD God 11 times in Genesis 2:4–25. LORD with capital letters in English stands for Yahweh, the sacred and personal name of God in Hebrew. Yahweh God is relational, redemptive, covenantal, and involved. Yahweh God picks up dust and shapes a man, breathes into the lifeless shape and it becomes a living soul! Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden, and formed a woman from Adam’s rib. The two creation accounts highlight different aspects of the Creator’s character as God and then as Yahweh God. ■

Surprising and Expected

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1–6

You are all children of the light and children of the day.—1 Thessalonians 5:5

An elementary school teacher told her class to be ready because in the coming week there would be a fire alarm. She taught them what they should do when the bell rang. They would need to follow directions and act promptly. But, of course, she didn't tell them when. They were to be ready to respond, because the alarm could ring at any moment!

Many of us may wonder: When will Jesus return? Only God the Father knows the exact answer to that question (vv. 1–3; Matt. 24:36). The comparison to a “thief in the night” (v. 2) indicates that the event will be surprising and sudden, just like the Rapture event discussed yesterday (1 Thess. 4:17). The second comparison, “as labor pains on a pregnant woman” (v. 3), indicates surprise and suddenness but not in the same way. After all, the woman knows she's going to give birth, even if she doesn't know exactly when. Preparations can and should be made.

According to Paul, this is exactly how Christians ought to be living

(vv. 4–6). For believers, the events surrounding Christ's return won't be a *total* surprise. We've been told enough about them in Scripture so that we can be watchful or vigilant (Matt. 25:13). Just as a pregnant woman nearing the end of her term decorates the nursery and packs a “go bag,” so also should Christians live “awake and sober,” that is, according to the light of God's Word.

Night and darkness are associated with spiritual insensitivity or obliviousness, while day and light are associated with spiritual knowledge and righteousness. Children of darkness are headed for “destruction” (v. 3), that is, judgment and hell (2 Thess. 1:9–10; 2 Peter 3:3–7). “Children of the light,” by contrast, have been rescued for an eternity with Christ!

► Second Peter 3 is another Bible passage about the end times. We encourage you to read it soon, especially because it advises us how to live watchful and prepared.

Pray with Us

As we await your return, help us spread the gospel with urgency among our friends, neighbors, and coworkers who are headed for destruction. We who know what is coming must warn those who are lost.

Live as Children of Light

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:7–11

Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate.—1 Thessalonians 5:8

The belt of truth. The helmet of salvation. The shield of faith. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells us to put on the “full armor of God” in order to prepare for spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10–17). We put on the breastplate of righteousness and shoes that signify “the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace” (v. 15). Note that the only offensive weapon is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (v. 17).

Today’s verse similarly refers to “putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet” (v. 8). As Christians, we should be as ready for action as a soldier, and understand that our faith will lead to conflict with the world and with Satan. This passage also contrasts light and dark or day and night (vv. 7–8). Children of the night live as enemies of God, while we, as children of the light, are to live holy and righteous lives. We should be

characterized by attitudes and actions that reflect our true identity.

Finally, Paul contrasts drunkenness and sobriety. Drunk people are impaired and out of control. Sober individuals, on the other hand, are able to think clearly and are in control of their choices and actions. The opposite of being drunk is to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18–20).

This is how we’re to live in light of the Second Coming—awake, sober, walking in the light, and spiritually prepared (1 Thess. 5:9–11). This is who God has made and saved us to be. Since our destiny is to “live together with him,” we should live now in such a way as to reflect His purposes and bring glory to His name!

► What might it mean for you and your family to live in accord with God’s redemptive purposes? Reflect and pray over this question in response to today’s devotional.

Pray with Us

Lord, you have warned us to prepare for your return, but you have also given us responsibilities in the present. Teach us what it means to live according to your purposes here and now.

Closing Exhortations, Part 1

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12–15

Always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.—1 Thessalonians 5:15

A well-known quote from the gangster movie *The Untouchables* expresses a strong spirit of retaliation or revenge: “You wanna know how to get [gangster Al] Capone? They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. That’s the Chicago way! And that’s how you get Capone.” In his closing exhortations to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds his readers that our natural “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” or payback instinct is not true for followers of Jesus. Instead, we’re to “strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else” (v. 15; see also Matt. 5:38–42).

One important example of this is Paul’s command that the church be good followers of its pastors and spiritual leaders (1 Thess. 5:12–13). Most translations render “care for you” (v. 12) as something like “lead you” or “preside over you.” Leaders work hard shepherding their fellow believers and deserve the highest levels of respect and love. If those who follow can “live in peace with each other”

(v. 13), they can help make leaders’ jobs less burdensome. The work of the church leaders would have been particularly important because Paul and his team had been driven from the city after only a few months with the new believers. Perhaps some were tempted to give their peers less respect (and more trouble?) than they gave the missionaries. If that was the case, the apostle gave the leaders his full support here.

Paul also gave a handful of additional exhortations for relationships among believers (v. 14). We should warn lazy and disruptive people to change their behavior (see May 30), encourage the discouraged, help the weak, and be patient with everyone. These godly actions are contrary to human sinfulness, which, for example, typically leads the strong to exploit the weak.

► Are you brooding over an unfairness you’ve endured or wrongs done to you? We encourage you to leave revenge to God (Prov. 20:22; Rom. 12:19). His justice is perfect!

Pray with Us

It is difficult to let go of resentment, Lord, especially when it seems justified. Move us to forgive, Father. We trust your justice and we recognize that others are undergoing sanctification just as we are.

Closing Exhortations, Part 2

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16–22

Hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.—1 Thessalonians 5:21–22

In 2020, many of us struggled to maintain a positive attitude. As week after week and month after month passed with no end to the pandemic in sight, it was easy for even the most ardent optimist to get discouraged. In today's reading, the apostle Paul urges his readers to "rejoice always" (v. 16). But how can we rejoice when life is hard?

Does Paul's command to rejoice mean we must never feel sad? No. What it does mean is that our sorrows will always be eclipsed by the joy we find in the Lord (Neh. 8:10; Matt. 13:44). We often see this pattern in the psalms: Sorrow, anger, or discouragement are honestly expressed, then they give way to faith, hope, and joy.

(1) "Rejoice always" is the first of eight commands that collectively give a concise but challenging portrait of the Christian life. (2) "Pray continually" (v. 17)—prayer must be our constant habit. (3) "Give thanks in all circumstances" (v. 18). Have you ever wondered what God's will

is for you? Here's part of the answer! Rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks are all part of worship. (4) "Do not quench the Spirit" (v. 19). This is a reminder not to allow our worship to become tradition-centered, entertainment-oriented, or any of the many other things it can become apart from the Holy Spirit. (5) and (6) "Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all" (vv. 20–21; see 1 Cor. 14:29–33). In our day, prophecy consists of "forthtelling" God's truth, so these commands highlight the need to verify all human claims with Scripture. (7) and (8) "Hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil" (vv. 21–22). These are two sides of the same coin and may be regarded as capstone commands.

► Are you an optimist or a pessimist? No matter what your natural disposition, we are called to be people who rejoice, even when life presents challenges. Ask God to help you focus on Him and not on your problems.

Pray with Us

Lord, help us not to brace ourselves with pessimism or deny hardship with optimism, but to embrace the truth. Transform us into people who embody Paul's exhortations in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–22.

Prayer and Encouragement

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.—1 Thessalonians 5:23

What does it mean when the Bible says we are to long for Christ's return? The fifth president of Moody Bible Institute, William Culbertson, once preached: "If you say you love the appearing of Christ and are indifferent to the claims of Christ and are unspiritual in your living and are worldly and careless in your life, there is no crown of righteousness waiting for you. You don't truly love His appearing."

In other words, there is an integral connection between our belief in Christ's return and our daily striving for practical holiness. In today's reading, Paul gave a final prayer or word of blessing or benediction (it's all three!) along exactly these lines (v. 23). The apostle had done the same in the middle of the epistle (1 Thess. 3:11–13). There, he'd ended the prayer with a reference to the Second Coming—"when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones" (v. 13). He did so again here—"at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:23). In both benedictions, the

focus is on striving to live holy and blameless lives until Christ comes again.

The key verb is "sanctify" (v. 23). Whereas "justification" is positional holiness—standing righteous before God due to Christ's sacrifice, "sanctification" is progressive holiness—growing in righteousness and spiritual maturity. This process will end in "glorification"—when our "whole spirit, soul and body" are entirely Christlike "through and through."

If that sounds impossible, you're right! We have no hope of getting there on our own. Thankfully, it's up to God, and since He's promised it, it's as good as done (v. 24). As Paul would later write: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

► If you want to learn about the end times, the book of Revelation is your best resource. We encourage you to add this final book of the Bible to your summer reading list.

Pray with Us

Father, we depend on you for the blamelessness you expect of us. Forgive us our attempts to attain our own righteousness. Plant in us the blessed peace of knowing that you are at work within us.

Love in Christ, Paul

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:25–28

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
be with you. — 1 Thessalonians 5:28*

Nowadays, we authenticate or verify as genuine a person's identity through such means as government-issued picture ID cards or notarized signatures. Higher standards of proof can be met by fingerprints, retinal scans, or DNA matching. These techniques were not available in the ancient world, of course, so Paul relied on church leaders to recognize his handwriting.

The apostle's usual mode of writing was to dictate aloud to an amanuensis (secretary). Then he customarily ended his epistles by writing the final greeting in his own hand (2 Thess. 3:17). This served to authenticate the letter, that is, to prove that it really was from Paul and not a false teacher.

As Paul closed this epistle, he asked the Thessalonians to pray for him and his team (1 Thess. 5:25). All believers are to pray for one another. It didn't matter that the apostle and his fellow missionaries were veteran church planters and the Thessalonians were "baby" believers. In addition

to praying faithfully for them, Paul humbly asked them to pray for him.

He couldn't be there in person, so instead he asked them to "Greet all God's people with a holy kiss" (v. 26). A kiss on the cheek was a culturally normal greeting in that day (and still is in some parts of the Middle East), one which Christians had reinterpreted to signify brotherly love (see 1 Peter 5:14). He also requested that his letter be read aloud to the assembled believers (v. 27). Before the advent of the printing press, reading aloud was a normal way of communicating with a group.

Paul closed with one more word of benediction: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (v. 28). God's grace was supremely important to him, and he often opened and closed his letters by mentioning it.

► We recommended to begin your study of Paul's letter by reading it all in one sitting. Why not finish it that way as well? Listening to an NIV audio version takes only eleven minutes!

Pray with Us

We ask you to bless our fellow believers, Lord, to strengthen them and protect them from the enemy. Grant them love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Dear Thessalonians, Again

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:1–2

Grace and peace to you.—2 Thessalonians 1:2

Do you get excited when you receive an actual hand-written letter? In today's era, letters are a rare treat. But in Paul's time, they were a necessary means of communication. This second epistle to the Thessalonians was likely written just a few months after the first one. Silas (also called Silvanus) and Timothy had probably hand-delivered 1 Thessalonians. When they returned to Paul at Corinth, they brought an alarming report: Someone had apparently been telling the church in Thessalonica that the "Day of the Lord" (Christ's return) had already started (2 Thess. 2:1–2). Or perhaps the believers had received a fake letter, purporting to be from Paul, that claimed something similar.

Paul determined to straighten out this situation right away! Since the local government would not have been glad to see him again (see Acts 17:5–9), he wrote a second letter. The executive summary: "No, the 'Day of the Lord' has not yet begun. Christ hasn't yet returned. If He had, you'd have been removed from this

earth, because the Rapture precedes the Tribulation. But continue to live godly lives and stand firm under the persecution you're facing."

Second Thessalonians was authored by the apostle Paul (v. 1). Silas and Timothy were also mentioned because they were his missionary colleagues and they were already known to the believers in Thessalonica. They would most likely have delivered this second letter. Paul began by greeting them with "grace and peace" (v. 2). More than just customary, these words are hallmarks of our salvation. "Grace" is the unmerited favor of God, especially in salvation (Eph. 2:8–9). "Peace" signifies our God-initiated reconciliation with Him (Rom. 5:1). Theologically, Paul's greeting offered his beloved friends in Thessalonica assurance of salvation and comfort in suffering.

► We encourage you (again) to begin this study by reading the entire epistle in one sitting. Doing so can help us see the big picture rather than losing the forest in the trees.

Pray with Us

Dear God, thank you for giving us your unmerited favor and for reconciling us with yourself. Renew our focus on your future coming and cause it to shape our lives in the present.

More Thankful Remembrances

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3–7a

Your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.—2 Thessalonians 1:3

The word *martyr* originally meant “witness”—someone who testifies to truths they have personally seen, heard, and experienced. Even in the first generation of believers, though, the word came to signify someone who testified to truth under threat of death. That’s what we mean today—a martyr is someone who chooses to die rather than to deny the gospel of Christ.

The Thessalonians were being severely persecuted and menaced with martyrdom. Why? Because they refused to bow before local gods, including the emperor. Such worship was regarded as a civil duty. To fail to do so was unpatriotic, even treasonous. It was easy for the Jews to stir up trouble for the Thessalonian Christians (1 Thess. 2:14–16).

Nonetheless, they were standing firm and even growing in their faith, a fact for which Paul was thankful (vv. 3–4). He’d similarly praised them in his first letter, highlighting “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your

endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:3).

“All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right” (1 Thess. 1:5)—the Thessalonians were true believers genuinely called and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The final outcome was assured. Suffering is part of every believer’s sanctification. When all is said and done, the Thessalonians would endure and be “counted worthy” or “made worthy.” All this is also evidence that “God is just” (vv. 6–7a). In the end, persecutors will be punished and suffering believers will be comforted. With God on our side, victory is certain. A biblical theology of suffering teaches us that perseverance is evidence of salvation and of God’s righteousness. Faith in God gives us the hope, strength, and grace to endure.

► What would it look like to stand for Jesus, even in the face of forceful opposition? Have you ever encountered conflict because of your faith in Christ? Ask God today for the strength you need to be faithful.

Pray with Us

Some of us face more persecution than others, but all Christians endure suffering. Lord, strengthen us to persevere through trials and embolden us to face opposition to the gospel—even to the point of death.

Justice and Christ's Return

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:7b–10

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.—2 Thessalonians 1:8

What is biblical justice? How is it different than what we mean by *justice* today? Pastor and author Tim Keller explained: “In the West, when we think of justice, we think of individual rights. We think justice means freeing individuals from the constrictions of the group, freeing them to do whatever they want regardless of what the group says. Biblical justice has a different trajectory. Biblical justice means interwovenness, interdependence, bringing individuals to see that our stuff isn’t just ours.”

Biblical justice is a concrete Christian concern in the here-and-now, even as we await the perfect justice with the Second Coming of our Savior. There’s no uncertainty here: Persecutors will face judgment; believers will be rewarded. “This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels” (v. 7b). At His first advent, Christ came to be the sacrifice for sin. At His second, He will return as Judge and King!

All unbelievers, those who have refused to accept Christ as Savior, will be punished (vv. 8–9). To say they “do not know God” and “do not obey the gospel” is the same thing, given that Christ is the one and only Way to God (John 14:6). The consequence of their choice is “everlasting destruction” or hell, meaning that they will be “shut out from the presence of the Lord.” While some have used the word “destruction” to argue for annihilationism, it instead indicates “complete ruin.” The fact is that their punishment in the “lake of fire” is eternal (Matt. 25:46; Rev. 20:14–15). And for those who believe? We’ll be worshiping! Christ will be “glorified in his holy people” and “marveled at among all those who have believed” (v. 10).

► Hell is a difficult doctrine, but just as important as other biblical truths. There’s no need to avoid it. Further Bible study is the way to get your questions answered!

Pray with Us

Lord, when we think about eternal judgement, it’s tempting to question your mercy. Strengthen our trust in you and use the horror of hell to fuel our efforts to spread the gospel. You do not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Paul's Prayer for Them

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:11–12

We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you.—2 Thessalonians 1:12

What does it mean for Christ to be *glorified* in us? The great English preacher Charles Spurgeon answered: “Even now His saints glorify Him. When they walk in holiness they do, as it were, reflect His light. Their holy deeds are beams from Him who is the Sun of Righteousness . . . Still the unformed clay is only in part seen and much remains to be done. How much more of the great Potter’s creating wisdom and sanctifying power will be displayed when we shall be the perfect products of His hand!”

This was Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians. Verse 11 focuses on the *process* of salvation, or sanctification. First, Paul prayed that God would make them worthy of His calling. Second, he prayed that God’s power would “bring to fruition” or give success in “your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith” that is, good works. These are the ways in which believers grow and mature. Neither of these two prayers was in doubt—

both were as good as answered. In that case, why pray? One reason is that God commands such prayers, especially for desires within His will. Prayer is part of what makes them happen. In addition, believers are encouraged to know that their brothers and sisters in Christ are lifting them up to the Father.

Verse 12 focuses on the *product* of salvation, or glorification: Paul knew that in the fulfillment of these prayers the name of Christ—“name” indicates the totality of His Person—would be glorified in the Thessalonians, and the Thessalonians in Christ. The former means that Christ would receive glory due to His work in their lives; the latter means that because they’re united with Christ they would share in His glory. The same is true for us—all by grace!

► How’s your prayer life? We asked this question back on May 2 as well. Does your daily prayer list include God’s promises about salvation? If not, why not add them?

Pray with Us

Father, as we soak our minds in your Word, help us recognize your promises about salvation. We lay claim to the things you have promised, and we thank you that you guarantee sanctification and glorification for your children.

The Day of the Lord

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4

*The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful.
Who can endure it?—Joel 2:11*

When natural disasters and wars occur in rapid succession, many people begin to talk about the End Times. They wonder what day the Lord might return, and which living person might be the promised Antichrist. According to the Moody Bible Commentary, the Antichrist who is controlled by Satan will be “a real person.” He will “offer himself for worship—a blatant claim to deity.” The Antichrist is a counterfeit Christ.

In today’s reading, Paul called the Antichrist the “man of lawlessness” (v. 3)—the only place in Scripture he’s given this title. His arrival will be a sign that the Day of the Lord has come. The Thessalonians were confused and alarmed about this issue. Some false teacher, or perhaps a fake letter supposedly from Paul, had them thinking that the Day of the Lord might have already started (vv. 2–3). This was definitely not true! Addressing this deception appears to have been Paul’s main and urgent purpose in writing this letter.

The Day of the Lord will be clearly signaled by several events. First, by the Rapture, “our being gathered to him” (v. 1). This is when the trumpet sounds and believers meet Christ in the air, as Paul had described in his previous letter (1 Thess. 4:17). Second, by rebellion or widespread apostasy (see Matt. 24:10–12). And third, by the coming of the “man of lawlessness” or the “man of sin,” also known as the Antichrist (v. 3; see Rev. 13).

The man of lawlessness will act “in accordance with how Satan works” (v. 9), which suggests he’ll be empowered by Satan himself. Like Satan, the “adversary,” he’ll oppose God. Like Satan, he’ll pridefully exalt himself over all creation (v. 4; Dan. 11:36–37). Like Satan, he’ll blasphemously proclaim himself to be God. Yet from the start, he’ll be “doomed to destruction” (v. 3).

► God’s Word gives us some background about Satan’s original rebellion and his prideful spirit. To learn more, we suggest reading Isaiah 14:12–14 and Ezekiel 28:1–19.

Pray with Us

Like the Thessalonians, we can easily be deceived by false teachers if we are not rooted in your Word. Keep our eyes focused so steadfastly on you that we cannot be lured away by lies.

Lawlessness Overthrown

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:5–12

Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.—Revelation 19:1

In 1997, musician and author Michael Card released an entire album on the Book of Revelation. Titled *Unveiled Hope*, the album includes songs such as “To the Overcomers,” “The Song of the Lamb,” and “The New Jerusalem.” Its main purpose is to celebrate the completion of God’s plan of redemption and Christ’s final victory.

Paul didn’t keep the Thessalonians in suspense about what would happen next during the Day of the Lord. The days of the man of lawlessness were numbered—Christ would easily conquer him (v. 8)! The apostle also reminded them of his teaching on these matters during the short time he’d been with them in person (v. 5). This added an authentic touch to the letter, for no one else would have been able to make that claim.

If the man of lawlessness hasn’t yet arrived, why not? Something or someone is restraining evil and holding back his coming (vv. 6–7). There are various theories about this, but most likely Paul meant the Holy Spirit. The “secret power of

lawlessness” or sin is already at work in the world, but the Spirit holds it in check. It’s “secret” only in the sense that the source and extent of its power (Satan) has not yet been fully revealed. At the proper time in God’s plan, the Spirit will be “taken out of the way.” This seems to be another indication of the Rapture, since believers’ exit would be a good time for the Spirit’s exit as well.

Then the “lawless one” will step forward and gain prominence through “all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie” (vv. 9–12). Unbelievers who have rejected the truth of the gospel will be ripe for his deceptive plucking. Those who delight in wickedness will fully earn their condemnation!

► Eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things, can be difficult to understand. If you pursue additional study of the Bible’s teaching on the end times, we recommend the commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians by John Walvoord and Mark Hitchcock.

Pray with Us

Dear God, you make us lovers of truth. Cultivate our thirst for your Word and heighten our sensitivity to your voice so we can discern between truth and lies. We are weak, but you are strong.

“Stand Firm and Hold Fast”

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17

God chose you as firstfruits.—2 Thessalonians 2:13

Before Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians, he wrote a letter to the Galatians. The church there had “astonished” the apostle by “turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.” False teachers had arrived, perverted the truth, and thrown the Galatians into confusion. Paul’s response was clear and forceful: “If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God’s curse!” (Gal. 1:6–9).

Paul didn’t want the Thessalonians to make the same mistake. In the face of false teaching and rumors, they should remember his teaching: “stand firm and hold fast” (v. 15). After his dramatic narrative of how those who reject the gospel will be deceived by the man of lawlessness during the Day of the Lord, Paul returned to his present time to give thanks that the Thessalonians were not like that (vv. 13–14). They had received the gospel with joy. Their lives had been transformed by the loving choice

and call of God and the ongoing sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. They were “firstfruits” in the sense that there would be more believers to come. Their destiny would not be judgment but rather sharing in Christ’s glory (v. 14; Rom. 8:17).

Paul was so thankful that he once again burst into a word of prayer, blessing, and benediction (vv. 16–17). His prayer was that their hearts would be strengthened and encouraged to persevere and to do good works, even as they experienced suffering. The Trinity features clearly in today’s reading. All three Persons are mentioned in verse 13. Both Father and Son are mentioned again in verse 14 and invoked in verse 16. Paul’s blessing is thus not a feel-good, therapeutic thing—it’s a rock-solid biblical truth with God’s sovereign power to back it up!

► What person or group in your life needs the blessing of verses 16–17? If you’re not sure, ask God to bring someone to mind. Then pray these words of Paul for them!

Pray with Us

We each know people who need prayer right now. Lord God, we echo Paul and ask that you encourage their hearts and strengthen them in every good deed and word.

The Spread of the Gospel

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5

Pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored.—2 Thessalonians 3:1

A recent survey by Arizona Christian University found that most American adults believe a gospel of works, that is, they don't believe the true gospel at all. About 48 percent think that if they are generally good or do enough good things during their life they will be accepted into heaven. Shockingly, 52 percent of self-described American Christians say the same.

Having shared his prayers for the Thessalonians, Paul went on to share two prayer requests of his own. His first was for the speedy spread of the true gospel (v. 1): Our salvation depends entirely on Christ's work of redemption, not on any merit of our own. His request demonstrates an instructive posture of humility: Even a veteran church planting team needs prayer, and even a young church can meet this need. Any believer can and should pray for any other believer, regardless of age, social status, experience, or maturity.

His second prayer request was for protection for himself and his fellow missionaries from wicked men (v. 2).

He was likely thinking of those who had originally stirred up trouble for him in Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:5–14), as well as those who were attacking him in Corinth at about this same time (Acts 18:12–13).

Paul was confident that these prayer requests would be granted because of God's faithfulness (v. 3). In fact, God had just given him a special promise of protection regarding the situation in Corinth (Acts 18:9–10). The Thessalonians, too, would be protected by Him from the "evil one" (Satan).

The appropriate response to God's faithfulness is our obedience (vv. 4–5). In that sense, Paul was also confident that the Thessalonians would stand firm and hold onto his teaching, establishing their hearts in Christ's perseverance and God's love.

► Does your church support home and overseas missionaries? Why not pray for these men and women by name today? There may even be a map and pictures in your church lobby.

Pray with Us

Today we remember the missionaries we support, and we pray for their physical and spiritual protection. May the enemy's every plan be disrupted so that the gospel may spread unhindered.

Laziness and Disorderliness

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6–10

Through laziness, the rafters sag; because of idle hands, the house leaks.—Ecclesiastes 10:18

In fixer-upper shows, the most amazing transformations happen when a house has experienced neglect. Ceilings leak. Floorboards are rotted. The structure has disintegrated due to the neglect of the previous owners. It takes a lot of hard work (and money) to restore the home to its former glory.

Neglect can have a detrimental effect on the Christian life as well. Apparently, sloth or laziness was a problem in the Thessalonian church (v. 6). Some believers had been depending on wealthy Christians to provide for their needs as part of a secular patronage system. They weren't willing to do physical work, because that meant a loss in social status. Instead, they were being "disruptive" with their idle time. The seriousness of the problem was indicated by Paul's formal command against it "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 6).

Believers were to "keep away" from such people. This was not a

complete break in fellowship, but a temporary, disciplinary withholding for the purpose of reconciliation (see vv. 14–15). Paul and his team had set an instructive, contrary example (vv. 7–10). They'd worked hard and not asked for financial support in order not to be a burden on the young church and not be negatively viewed regarding their motives (see 1 Thess. 2:9). They practiced what they preached.

The missionaries had a right to financial support, but in that context they chose not to exercise it (v. 9; see also 1 Tim. 5:17–18). Why not? For the sake of the gospel. The apostle didn't want people to see their presentation of the gospel as financially motivated.

► Proverbs has many verses about hard work and laziness, including amusing word-portraits of the "sluggard." Using a concordance to look these up will bring laughter and wisdom!

Pray with Us

Father, teach us how to work and how to rest; let us not be guilty of idleness. Help us understand how to "make the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16).

A Reminder to Do Good

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:11–15

Let us not become weary in doing good.—Galatians 6:9

In the city of Joppa in the days of the early church, a believer named Dorcas (also called Tabitha) “was always doing good and helping the poor.” The poor in that time and culture included many widows. When she fell sick and died, they mourned greatly. But Peter prayed, and by God’s power Dorcas was raised back to life. “Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive” (Acts 9:36–42).

Dorcas was a godly woman who lived out the title of today’s devotional, in contrast to the Thessalonian slackers condemned by Paul. He’d commanded the church not to condone the slothful behavior of certain believers (see yesterday’s study). “They are not busy; they are busybodies” (v. 11), he joked, but with serious intent. They must change their ways (v. 12)! Imagine this letter being read aloud to the whole congregation . . . everyone was probably looking at the guilty persons. This public shaming, though,

was lovingly done in order to spur them on to better behavior.

The key principle is found in today’s title, as well as reinforced by today’s verse. We should “never tire of doing what is good” (v. 13). If that sounds impossible, you’re right! Only with God’s love and in God’s strength can we live righteous lives and do good deeds that bring glory to God.

If the Thessalonian idlers did not heed Paul’s command and rebuke (from the public reading of the letter), the other believers should stop associating with them (vv. 14–15). As we’ve mentioned, this was a temporary measure to push them to repentance. In this case, their change of heart would be clear to all, because they’d start working and providing for themselves (v. 12). The underlying purpose of all church discipline is restoration (Gal. 6:1).

► We live busy lives. But are we busy doing good? Consider how you spend your days and ask yourself if the truth found in this passage should reorder your schedule.

Pray with Us

Search our hearts, Lord, and unveil all motives that do not come from you. Show us any “busybody” tendencies in our lives so that we can repent. We want to be busy instead with works of righteousness.

More Love in Christ, Paul

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:16–18

May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way.—2 Thessalonians 3:16

If there was a recording of our conversation for an entire day, what would it reveal? As our words played back, would God be glorified in our language? In their book, *Redeeming How We Talk*, Ken Wytsma and A. J. Swoboda wrote: “Words are not to give us power over others. Words are gifts to help us worship God and serve people.”

Throughout his two letters to the Thessalonians, and especially in today’s reading, Paul used language in exactly these God-intended ways. First came yet another word of prayer, blessing, or benediction (v. 16). He asked that the Lord of peace would Himself give them “peace at all times and in every way.” “Peace” means a holistic sense of well-being built on the foundation of peace with God (Rom. 5:1; Phil. 4:7; Col. 3:15).

The Thessalonians needed such peace particularly at this time because the false teaching about the Day of

the Lord had unsettled and shaken them. They were no doubt also understandably anxious about the persecution they’d been facing ever since the founding of their church. In all cases, peace is inextricably connected with God’s presence, so Paul also prayed, “The Lord be with all of you”—a prayer that had already been answered by Christ, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

Next, Paul authenticated the letter by taking up the pen and writing a verse himself (v. 17). We’ve previously explained how this worked to verify the author of the letter. Finally, he closed, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all” (v. 18). This is our hope and prayer for you as well!

► In response to our study of Paul’s letters, why not pen one of your own? Write to a friend and tell them what you learned from 1 and 2 Thessalonians this month.

Pray with Us

We praise you, Lord Jesus, for your peace, which your presence spreads. We praise you for your grace, which frees us from shame. We praise you for the truth you teach us through your Word by the Holy Spirit.



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