

Study/Devotional Notes on 1 Thessalonians

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These notes may be used in whatever way the reader finds profitable, in part or in full. I pray they will be edifying to the people of God in Christ and draw new people into His kingdom by faith.

Note: this document is searchable by chapter, verse, or word.

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1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

Getting Started

As we get started today, let's do a little bit of background and setting work to anchor ourselves in this particular letter, and then let's go ahead and look at the first couple of verses. Our focus: laying the groundwork.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

1Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. 2We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. 3We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We're thinking about getting some new animals for the hobby farm - nothing big like a horse or a llama, but something small and a little more in keeping with the funky menagerie we already have. Miniature donkeys are the epitome of cute and make great pets, so that's one option; Jacob and Taylor think our Tufted Roman geese could use some company, so new goslings are another idea we're looking at; and finally, I've always thought that our place would look really cool with a few peafowl cruising around the yard. My wife, Linda, is against that last idea, because she says peacocks are too noisy and never go to bed! Regardless of what we end up adding to our brood, one thing we'll have to do beforehand is educate ourselves about the care and keeping of what we acquire. In order to treat our animals in the most responsible way and in order to get the most enjoyment out of them will require that we be willing to learn new things.

If you think about it, the same is true whenever we approach the Word of God. Not that our Bible is in any way similar to a farm animal (!)...but to treat it responsibly and with proper respect, to derive the greatest blessing possible from it, requires that we be willing to learn. It requires context. It requires a little bit of background. And today as we open up 1 Thessalonians for the first time together, laying a little bit of groundwork will go a long way in helping us to get the most from this portion of the Scriptures.

The Holy Spirit used Paul to write this particular letter to the church at Thessalonica, and it dates from right around 51 A.D. That makes 1 Thessalonians the earliest portion of God's Word attributed to Paul's authorship, with the possible exception of Galatians, which may have been written a bit earlier depending on how you look at some of the history. Why was this letter written? For several reasons, actually, but foremost it was to teach and encourage a young church in the grip of persecution.

The best way to get a look at the conditions facing the church in Thessalonica at this point in its history is to go back to Acts 17 and read about Paul's time there; a time cut short by people extremely hostile to the message of Jesus and intent on destroying anyone bold enough to share it. After a few weeks of being an advocate for Christ there, Paul was actually run out of town and had to leave under cover of darkness. And not only was he run out of town, but when some of the Thessalonians found out he had gone to Berea, they followed him there to stir up more trouble for him. Needless to say, then, for anyone residing in Thessalonica and claiming a relationship with Christ or for anyone identifying themselves as a member of the church, there was bound to be trouble. To make matters worse, with Paul gone there really wasn't any pastoral leadership to speak of, so what we have is a young church of new converts, both Jew and Greek, essentially drifting in the midst of a hostile environment. Thessalonica, by the way, wasn't an unsophisticated backwater kind of a place filled with backwards, intolerant people; it was a cosmopolitan city of over 200,000 with a highly developed cultural center and a pluralistic worldview. Introduce Christ into the mix, however, and suddenly you have a different kind of a situation - and it's to that situation that Paul speaks in this letter.

So - as we seek to apply the Word of the Lord here to our own lives, we will do well to remember what prompted its writing to the original recipients, and we will be further blessed to consider the steadfast faith of those people who dared to live out their commitment to Christ in such unfavorable circumstances.

Verse 1: In the first verse, Paul identifies himself, along with those who are with him: Silas, who has accompanied Paul throughout most of his second missionary journey, and Timothy, Paul's spiritual son or as Paul is fond of saying, "My true son in the faith." The mention of these two men here at the beginning is significant, because as you see when you go back and read through Acts 17, they had actually helped to found the Thessalonian church. As the three were together in person in the founding of the church, now Paul emphasizes that the three remain together in continuing to encourage the church from afar.

Verse 2: After affirming their positional standing as people of God and after pronouncing his traditional blessing of grace and peace upon them, in verse 2 Paul moves on to talk about thanksgiving. "We always thank God for you," Paul declares, "Making mention of you in our prayers." The reason he thanks God for the Thessalonians, in addition to what we'll see in verse 3, is because of the fact that they have responded to the gospel message and are now found to be in Jesus Christ. Actually, if you survey all of Paul's letters to the various churches, he expresses this kind of thanksgiving in almost every one of them - even to the churches in need of a good swift kick in the pants. The only exception is his letter to the Galatians, who needed two swift kicks in the pants. No thanksgiving to God for them in that letter! At any rate, after telling this young church that he thanks God for them, he mentions why he does so.

Verse 3: Verse 3 gives us the specifics: their work produced by faith, their labor prompted by love, and perhaps most important in this context, their endurance inspired by hope. Notice what

Paul is saying: he says that faith, hope and love are present in abundance in the lives of these people, and that faith, hope and love are the main factors guiding the life and ministry of the Thessalonian church. By mentioning these things at the outset, Paul seeks to inject a strong dose of encouragement into this congregation, and by affirming them for remaining strong in the midst of difficult circumstances - their endurance inspired by hope - he is setting the stage for what he'll be addressing in the remainder of the letter. These first three verses are a marker for us all as to what's coming down the pike: living strong, living with focus, and living strong and with focus toward a sure and secure end, regardless of what might happen.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, that should give us a pretty good sense of who we're reading about, why we're reading about them, and what God will be saying to them through his chosen apostle. But always remembering that God's Word is timeless, that it is living and active and that it always achieves the purpose for which He sends it, we want to realize that this is God's Word to you and me as well - and just as He used Paul to speak hope and truth and a call to action in the lives of the Thessalonians, so He will use this letter to do the same in us. May we all be ready for and welcoming of that great blessing! Take care, and we'll see you back here tomorrow.

1 Thessalonians 1:4-7

Getting Started

As we get started today, Paul sets out to encourage men and women going through difficult times because of their faith in Christ. Our focus: chosen in the Lord Jesus!

1 Thessalonians 1:4-7

4For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 7And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

Over the past year, it has been my privilege to talk to you in several different ways about the concept of being chosen by God - and really, there are a lot of ways to illustrate what it's all about. As I write today's lesson, you'll note that here in America we're now into the full swing of the political primaries, where people are doing what? Choosing their candidate for the presidency. If you're a political junkie you can easily get wrapped up in the posturing and the politicking and the campaign strategies and tactics the candidates use to try and secure the nomination of their party. The democratic process can be convoluted to be sure, and it's certainly not perfect, but in the end one thing we can all say is that the system works. Complain all you want to about whatever you want to, make all the suggestions for improvement that you want, work for change if you feel that to be your calling, but do those things recognizing that at the end of the day, the truth is that we are blessed with the electoral process that we have.

In today's reading, we have the privilege of being subject to another kind of electoral process. Here, though, there is no politicking or posturing. Here there is no need for tacticians or strategists. Here there is no need to talk about who will win and who will lose. Here there is only

the reality of a victory already obtained; a victory in which, through faith in the finished work of a Master Candidate, we all share.

Verse 4: As Paul continues to share words of encouragement with a young Thessalonian church, a church in distress because of the persecution it is suffering, he takes care to remind them already again of the fact that in Jesus Christ, they have been chosen by God to be His very own. In part one of verse 4 he says “You are loved by God!” In part two of verse 4 he goes on to say “God has chosen you!” In Bible talk, both of these words - loved and chosen - are election words. They’re words of assurance which let us know that our standing in Jesus Christ is one of security and safety in Almighty God.

Verses 5-6: In verse 5 Paul mentions the reason for his confidence on behalf of the Thessalonians: it’s the fact that when the Gospel came to them, it came with power - that is, it had a transforming impact on them - it came with the Holy Spirit, and it came with deep conviction. Paul, Silas and Timothy were eyewitnesses of how the message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus radically changed the people when they heard it. What’s more, in verse 6 Paul recalls the fact that the Thessalonians then became imitators of him, his fellow workers, and of the Lord Jesus Himself, and they did this in spite of the fact that they suffered as a result of it. In other words, Paul is taking time here to affirm the true genuineness of the faith of these brothers and sisters in the Lord, and by doing so, he is seeking to build them up.

Verse 7: Verse 7 lets us know that so completely were the Thessalonians transformed by the power of the Gospel, they ultimately became a model of faith to other believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia, and as we’ll see next time, even to places beyond. Again, what is Paul aiming to do by sharing these things with the church? He wants them to hang on, to stay the course, and to realize that the lives they are living for Jesus Christ are having an impact far beyond the locality of their congregation.

Wrapping Up

Wrapping up, I’m going to go out on a limb today. I could close things off by reiterating for us the wonderful truth of God’s Word which speaks to us of our election in Christ. Doing so would be a faithful summation of what Paul has shared with the Thessalonians in this section. Instead though, I’m going to close within a lovingly constructed framework of challenge. There is a major question being posed for you and me today, and it is this: when we consider how our lives have been impacted by the gospel of Christ, when we meditate on the glorious fact that we have been chosen to be God’s very own people by the sacrifice of His one and only Son, where is the evidence of change? Can we point to where our lives bear the mark of transformation...not perfection, but the mark of the process of being conformed to the image of Christ? If others were to hear of our faith in the Lord Jesus, would the proof be in the pudding in the way we live, the manner in which we interact with others, and the prioritization we give to the things of God? Now - those are all very law-based kind of questions, I know. But holding our lives up to the example of the Christians at Thessalonica and asking ourselves some hard questions might just be a spiritual exercise that yields some powerful prayer time for us at the foot of the cross. That’s certainly the effect these verses have on me when I read them - and I can’t possibly imagine a downside to spending some purposeful, focused time with the Lord as a result. Have a great day, and we’ll see you back here tomorrow to close off our week!

1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

Getting Started

As we get started today, the apostle Paul keeps up his encouraging words to the Thessalonians in light of their circumstances. Our focus: praising God for faithful witness!

1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

8The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

I can't remember if I've mentioned this before, but here in southwest Missouri we are known in our community as the slightly eccentric out-of-towners who do rather unusual things. For one thing, none of our animals are penned in, including our goats, who like to roam around with the dogs and who pretend that they are the king and queen of everything. Most farmers would never think of letting their goats run loose, but then, we aren't most farmers - we're exiled suburbanite wannabe farmers. The other thing we are in the habit of doing is that we like to mow interesting designs and messages into our grass. We live on a county highway, and our land sits on the south-facing hillside of a little valley formed by a creek bed. As a result, anybody driving by has a clear view of the yard. So in the west pasture, there's a big labyrinth with a cross in the middle of it. In the main yard, in any given week you'll find Bible verses in 30-foot letters, or hearts, or circles, or whatever else strikes my fancy, all carved out by my little John Deere tractor. I figure that if I have to mow I might as well have some fun with it, and if I don't like the results I can always do something different the next week. The result has been comical, because it's gotten to the point that pretty much everyone in our area - the whole southern portion of our county - knows the white house on the hill with the crazy lawnmower guy!

In today's reading, what we have before us is a report by the apostle Paul which speaks of the fame of the Thessalonian Christians. There are many religious people in their world who hold to many different religious philosophies, and because religion can be a touchy topic and because most people don't want to get too deep when it comes to such a potentially divisive issue, most of them would never think of talking to other people about why they believe as they do, much less doggedly hold to belief in a god which might get them killed. But then, the folks in the Thessalonian church aren't most people; Christianity isn't most religions; and the deity Lord Jesus Christ is unlike any other claim ever made. All these things taken together have made the church at Thessalonica stand out.

Verse 8: In verse 8, Paul picks up from where we left off last time. Not only has the faith and courage of the Thessalonians become a model for all of their fellow believers through the whole region of Macedonia and Achaia - the two Roman provinces which divide Greece into two halves - but in fact, their faith has been made known everywhere. Now, like my house sitting on a hill next to a county highway, a lot of this has to do with geography. Thessalonica is, on the one hand, a hugely busy seaport. Stuff comes in and out of there from just about every known point on the globe. On the other hand, Thessalonica is also intersected by one of the main roads of the day, the Egnatian Way. Being a major trade and travel route, whatever's going on in Thessalonica is going to find its way into the conversations of people on the road. When you remember how big this city is and how comparatively small the Christian fellowship is there, the

fact that people would know about the church at all tells you that the establishment of Christianity in that place was more than just a tiny ripple in a big pond.

Verses 9-10: In verses 9-10, Paul relates the reports he hears about the Thessalonians from these various and far-flung outposts, and as he recounts these points I want you to make note of verse 10 in particular, which we'll get to in just a moment. First, though, in verse 9 we have the following:

Number one, the Thessalonians have turned away from idols. For the Greeks and secular Jews among them that could mean any number of different religious belief systems and any number of different man-made objects of worship. For the religious Jews among them, their idols would have been the legalism and dead traditionalism they had once trusted in for salvation. "We are children of Abraham" was a rallying cry for many Jews, but the Christian Gospel pointed out very clearly that only through the grace of Jesus Christ could a man or woman be saved.

Number two, having turned from idols, the Thessalonians had now turned to the true and living God and had given their lives over to serving Him. And then finally, in verse 10 Paul goes onto say that as the Thessalonian Christians now serve the true and living God, they also wait for His Son from heaven, the Son He raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues them from the coming wrath. This important for us to see not just because it's a complete and explicit statement of the Gospel, but because we're going to see it again and again and again in this letter.

Indeed, at the end of every chapter in 1 Thessalonians, Paul speaks about the coming of Jesus. Because of what these men and women are going through, because of the trials that they are enduring as followers of Christ, he holds this promise up for them as a way to keep them strong and as a way to keep them focused on the eternal nature of their reward rather than the temporal nature of their suffering. We'll have lots of time over the next several weeks to talk about this issue further, because just as it was surely a blessing to the Thessalonians to remember that all-encompassing truth, so it is for you and me.

Wrapping Up

That's going to wrap things up for us today, and as we go into the weekend, I hope that the way we've ended today will prompt you to spend some time pondering the reality of your inheritance as a child of God. Remember, through the mercy of Jesus you have been given the promise of a bequest that can never perish, spoil or fade. It's being kept for you right now in heaven, and at the right time, you will come into its full possession! Have a great Saturday and Sunday, and we'll see you back here at the beginning of next week!

1 Thessalonians 2:1-3

Getting Started

As we get started today, we find Paul recounting the time he had spent in Thessalonica establishing and building up the church there. Our focus: success redefined.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-3

1 You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. 2 We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. 3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.

Right before Christmas, I built a 5-foot welded wire fence to house my animals over the holidays. We were going to be gone for a few days, and to make things easier on the people who would be caring for them in our absence, I towed the goat shed, chicken house, and water trough into one central spot behind the machine shed and enclosed them all. All my neighbors had to do was toss some food in a couple times a day, and everything else would take care of itself.

When we got back from our trip, we were surprised to be met by goats and chickens running down the driveway to greet us. It was a happy reunion, and no one had gone missing, but it was immediately apparent to us that the fence had somehow been breached. Did I build it wrong? Had it been knocked over? Had somebody left the gate open? As it turned out, it was none of those things. The fence was still intact and everything was just as I had left it. It's just that the chickens decided for the first time in their young lives that five feet wasn't very high to fly, and the goats calculated that by jumping onto the roof of their little shed, they could then jump onto the roof of the machine shed, and from the machine shed roof it was only an eight-foot drop to freedom. Here's the question: was my fence a success?

Verse 1: I ask that today because it brings to mind Paul's opening words here in our text. "You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure." The fact that Paul even has to say that begs the question a little bit, doesn't it! So why does he say it? Well, let's do a little bit of history together: Paul had visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey and it hadn't been a very easy trip. It started with a partnership-breaking argument between he and Barnabus over whether to take Mark along with them, which surely caused hard feelings and which also resulted in Paul having to come up with a Plan B for a coworker. After Barnabus took off for Cyprus with Mark, Paul chose Silas to take Barnabus' place, and a little later on added Timothy into the mix as he continued his journey. The team was a good one and together they made some great strides for the Gospel as they moved from place to place, but to make a long story short, by the time Paul and his companions got to Thessalonica, they were embroiled in opposition and controversy.

Verse 2: As verse 2 alludes, they had been beaten, imprisoned, and falsely charged in Philippi, and once they left there and made their way into Thessalonica, it wasn't long before they ran into trouble yet again. As we mentioned in our introduction to this book, it was only about three weeks before a group of disgruntled Jews rose up to cause Paul, Timothy, and Silas a great deal of grief, and not long after that persecution began, they were forced to leave town. All in all, looking at things on the surface we would be hard-pressed to label Paul's campaign as any kind of success. But now look at the second part of verse 2: even with all that had come against these men of God, what did they stay focused on doing, and what was the result? The

text tells us that they were bold in God to speak the Gospel among the Thessalonians regardless of the conflict, and the result was obvious: when they left, they left a vibrant, thriving congregation that was able to flourish even in the absence of pastoral leadership.

Verse 3: Verse 3 tells us in part why that was able to happen. First, when Paul and his companions preached the Gospel, they preached truth, not error. Second, when they preached the Gospel, they walked the talk; what they shared with the Thessalonians was something that they embodied in their own lives. Finally, when they preached the Gospel they did so with pure motives, not with the intention of personal gain, not from a desire to control, and not from an aim to deceive. These are all important things to be sure, but what is especially noteworthy for us is that each of the things that Paul mentions here is directly in contrast to how teachers of false religious principles worked among the people. So not only was Paul's message unique, but his approach was unique as well; it backed up the Word of truth he had been called to share.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, one thing that comes through very clearly for us is that success in the eyes of the world is very different from the way God sees success, and thus, different from the way God's people see success as well. Don't you love Paul's commitment in the face of adversity? Don't you love the fact that he was able to accentuate the positive and slough off the negative? And isn't it great to see that regardless of the constant barrage of attacks from the enemy, Paul and his fellow workers were able to keep their eyes on the Lord and on the work He had given them to do, using that as their motivation to keep on keeping on? There's a lesson in stick-to-itiveness there somewhere to be sure - but the greater lesson by far is the power of God to carry us through whatever comes along, even as He accomplishes His purposes in and through us along the way. Think about that today, won't you? Take care, and we'll see you back here tomorrow.

1 Thessalonians 2:4-6

Getting Started

As we get started today, Paul talks more in depth about the manner in which he and his fellow workers shared the Gospel of Christ with the Thessalonians. Our focus: approved, entrusted, and courageous!

1 Thessalonians 2:4-6

4On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. 5You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. 6We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you...

One of the most important things to learn as a minister of the Gospel is also, as I can tell you from personal experience, one of the hardest things to put into practice in the local church: that of making sure that you're a God-pleaser, not a man-pleaser. To be a God-pleaser, not an elders-or church council-or board of directors-or committee-pleaser. Do you love your people, want to serve them, long to see them grow, want them to be happy and productive members of your congregation? Of course you do. Do you want to work with them in the partnership of the Gospel, to listen to them and learn from them and grow along with them? You **MUST**; that's the

way God designed it to be and that's the greatest joy you can experience in ministry! But to do any of those things at the expense of God's Word, to compromise what you know to be true to placate your alligators or keep the boat from being rocked or let sleeping dogs lie, can only hurt your people in the long run. And so part of your job - your responsibility - as a pastor is to, when required, lovingly make the tough call - even when it involves big givers, even when it offends the power brokers...even in the face of threats, of manipulation, and of sure retribution. There comes a time in every church worker's life when he or she must let God be true and let the chips fall where they may.

Verse 4: Now: I bring these things up today in the complete absence of any kind of agenda. I have no axe to grind, I am disgruntled with no one, and I am not the secret messenger of any of your pastors out there! No one has slipped me a \$5.00 under the table to emphasize this in today's study time. I emphasize these things only because they need to be emphasized; they're really part and parcel of what Paul says in today's reading. Many Bible scholars will tell you that this portion of 1 Thessalonians 2 is one of the greatest manuals on engaging in ministry that we have in all of Scripture. The pastoral epistles certainly talk about the qualifications thereof, but here in these verses, we have Paul's own life as an example of how it is to be carried out. Over everything else that Paul will say here, he begins by saying this: As men approved by God and entrusted with the Gospel, we serve an audience of One. We're not in it to win it, we're not about making you feel warm and fuzzy, we're here to speak for God and let the chips fall where they may.

Verse 5: That, in fact, was one of the unique hallmarks of Paul's, Silas' and Timothy's ministry among the Thessalonians. As we said last time, the manner in which they lived and the message that they shared was enormously different than what the people there were used to hearing and seeing, and that in and of itself was one of the reasons they sat up and took notice. In fact, in verse 5 Paul reminds them again of the absence of things like flattering words or poorly concealed greed, so common among the heretical teachers of the day. As God is his witness, Paul stresses not only the uniqueness of his message, but also the uniqueness of its delivery.

Verse 6: Finally, in verse 6 we have a restatement of what was said in the beginning, phrased in just a little bit different way and with an added postscript. First, praise from men was something Paul and his companions never sought, not from the Thessalonians or anyone else. It was never their aim, and certainly, the very substance of their message bore that out. Second, even though as apostles of Christ and of the church they could have been a burden to the Thessalonians - that is, could have demanded that the fledgling church support them and take care of their needs - they didn't do that either. It was further evidence that Paul and his team were legitimate, and that indeed, the Gospel of Jesus Christ which they preached was legitimate as well.

Wrapping Up

Wrapping up for the day, there are several different things that we can glean from this passage. First, it definitely speaks to those of us who are in ministry about both the aim and the attitude with which we are to speak the Word of Christ. How are we doing in that realm? What might the Lord be saying to us about our shepherding? Where are we on track? Where are we not? When's the last time we did a motive check? For those of us under the teaching of a pastor, we benefit from this passage as well. God did not put these words here just to help us test the message and motives of those who serve us; He also put them here to help us understand,

accept, and accord honor to our ministers for the calling that they have received from God. Their job is not always an easy one, in fact, is very often not an easy one. The man or woman of God in a position of ministry is bound by the Word of God above anything else. We have brought them to our churches to bear that standard - even when it's not the most comfortable or convenient thing for us to receive. I pray that you'll be blessed in pondering these things - and I look forward to seeing you back here tomorrow. Take care!

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12

Getting Started

As we get started today, Paul moves from sharing with the Thessalonians about how they were not treated by him, to how they were treated when he and his fellow workers spread the Gospel among them. Our focus: like a mother with her children - and more!

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12

7...But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. 8We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. 9Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. 10You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. 11For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, 12encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

On Mother's Day a few years ago, one of the teachers at our Christian day school shared a video testimony at church about memories she had of her mother. It was one of the most touching things I had ever heard. She made mention of her mom always being ready with hot, fresh-baked cookies from the oven and tall, cold glasses of milk after school. She talked about how her mom had encouraged her to be whatever she wanted to be in life, and how she was a role model, and how she had a strong faith. But wrapping all of those things together was the fact that this teacher's mother was - and continued to be - always there for her. Mom's support never failed.

Moms are great, aren't they! And it's because moms are so great that in today's reading, the apostle Paul uses the illustration of a mom to talk about the way he, Silas, and Timothy had cared for the new Christians at Thessalonica when they were with them - and by extension, now continue to care for them through the writing of this letter.

Verse 7: Right up front in verse 7, we're hit with the metaphor. Gently, like a mother caring for her little children, so Paul and his team had cared for them. I like the way the NKJV renders this verse: "But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children." God Himself had used a similar metaphor to talk about the way He had cared for the children of Israel; Moses used it to refer to how he cared for the Israelites as well; and we should mention that, not unique to this letter, Paul also uses this illustration with the Galatians and the Corinthians when he writes to them.

Verse 8: In verse 8 we have the application: Their love for the Thessalonians was so strong that not only were they willing to share the Gospel with them as they had been called to do, but they

went beyond that, sharing their very selves with these special people. The Thessalonians had become dear to Paul and the team, and their feelings for the church moved them to do even more than was necessary on their behalf.

Verse 9: Verses 9-12 give us the specifics of how that manifested itself. In verse 9 Paul speaks of toil and labor. The reference here is to the fact that rather than ask the Thessalonians for support as they ministered among them, Paul, Silas and Timothy worked for themselves. Night and day they did whatever was necessary to support their own daily needs so that these new Christians wouldn't stumble by being asked for money.

Verse 10: In verse 10 Paul talks about conduct: that he, Silas and Timothy were holy, righteous, and blameless in the midst of the people as they ministered among them. The Thessalonians and God Himself are witnesses of that fact, which is a bold statement for Paul to make; one he couldn't make if it weren't true. Again, this had a validating impact on his message, but it also served to show the Thessalonians what the Christian life in action really looked like. It was a blessing on both counts.

Verses 11-12: As we move into verse 11-12, Paul finishes up by reminding the church that not only was the team like a momma to them; they also filled the role of a loving father, exhorting, comforting, and charging the Thessalonians to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, the great and mighty God who has called them to salvation and promised them heaven. This is a beautiful completion of the picture, isn't it: the gentle, nurturing presence of a mother standing alongside the encouraging, comforting presence of a father, together providing everything that is needed to grow strong and healthy in Jesus Christ.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, this will mark the end of Paul's remarks about his personal conduct in ministry, at least for the next little while. When we pick up tomorrow we'll shift back to the faith of the Thessalonians themselves and the way that they are progressing in their growth and knowledge of God. In the meantime, I hope that the examples we've seen here today (as well as yesterday) will prompt thanksgiving in your own heart for the spiritual leaders God has placed in your life. Pray for those who serve the Lord and you in your local congregation. Encourage them. Thank them. And if they are lacking, forgive them - we all need forgiveness! - and entreat the Lord on their behalf that they be faithful witnesses to His Son in all things. God bless you dearly in our Lord Jesus, and we'll see you again next time.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Getting Started

As we get started today, Paul praises the Lord for the faith of the Thessalonians and speaks words of judgment against those who are enemies of the Gospel. Our focus: the power of the Word.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

13And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. 14For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things

those churches suffered from the Jews, 15who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men 16in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

In the Barnes and Noble where I sometimes go to work and drink coffee during the day, there's an older gentleman who comes in every morning to drink his cup of coffee and read several newspapers. He's very methodical: first he breezes through USA Today, which takes him about 15 minutes. Then he moves on to the local paper, which takes another 15 minutes or so, and finally, he takes the Wall Street Journal and reads it front to back, which takes him more than an hour. Sometimes it takes him close to two hours though, and the reason is that he's a popular guy in the store. There are a lot of regulars who like to stop by and chat with him for a few minutes, and more often than not, they always tell him to hang in there and keep the faith. They say that partly because people in this community are just prone to talk that way. But the other reason they say that goes a little deeper. You see, this gentleman is a recent widower. And right now, the grief is still fresh enough and hurts badly enough that this routine is one of the only things that keeps him going. Get up; come in; drink coffee; read the papers; visit a little. It's not a lot, and there are still many hours for him to fill in his day when he leaves at the end of each morning, but it's something. And for the next little while in his life, that something will be his lifeline.

In today's reading here in 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul talks about the greatest of lifelines: our faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ. His sinless life, His sacrificial death, and His resurrection on the third day brought us forgiveness and reconciliation with our heavenly Father, and saved us from the certainty of eternal death. In Jesus we have been given the power to become children of God, children who will be alive forevermore in the presence of our Savior! It's a lifeline in the truest sense of the word, and Paul sets out in these verses to remind the Thessalonians - and us - of how it is we came to be rescued.

Verse 13: In verse 13 Paul expresses his thanksgiving to the Lord for the fact that this young church has received the Word, and not only that they received it, but specifically, how they received it. What does the text say? That they welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it really is: the Word of God. Furthermore, Paul says, this Word of God is now effectively at work in all who believe. What does he mean by that? Well, we've often said that the Word of God is living and active, right? That is, God's Word has the power to do in us what it says. We could look at numerous passages that support that statement, but perhaps the best single place to see a summary of all that the Word does in us is in Psalm 19. Let me read verses 7-11 for you, and as I do that, let me also encourage you to go back to that passage on your own later on and dig deeper into it, because it's really fantastic:

"The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward."

Verse 14: So - God's Word is at work in the hearts of His people in Thessalonica; that's the point that Paul is making, that's why he's thanking God, that's why he is so upbeat as he

endeavors to encourage them in their faith. As we move into verse 14, Paul points out some of how the working of God's Word is making itself known in the life of this church. First, remembering that the Thessalonians' faith had become an example to many, Paul now points out how they are also conforming themselves in doctrine and practice to some of the more established churches in Judea. And not only are they orthodox in their belief, they are also showing themselves to be patient in suffering as they encounter the same kind of persecution that the Judean churches have been subjected to.

Verse 15: It's as he makes mention of that persecution that Paul makes a transition in the text, and we see it happen at the end of verse 14 and into verse 15. Who is it that is doing the persecuting? It's the Jews. Now, let's be very clear here. Paul is not talking in general about people of Jewish descent. He's not making a racial slur or an anti-Semitic statement. Remember, there are Jews as well as Gentiles throughout the church, including the church in Thessalonica. Further, Paul himself is a Jew, and frankly, a Jew who formerly persecuted the church himself. So when Paul mentions the Jews here in verse 15 as those who persecute the church of Christ, he is simply speaking a verifiable fact about religious Jews, past and present, who rejected the things of God. It was the Jews who killed Jesus, it was the Jews who killed their own prophets of old who told of the coming of Jesus, it was the Jews who were persecuting the churches in Judea, and it was the Jews who drove Paul and his companions out of Thessalonica and who were persecuting the church there.

Verse 16: What does Paul say about them? Well, speaking from personal experience as one who used to be just like them, he says the following: they do not please God; they are contrary to all men; they are doing their best to prevent the Gospel from coming to the Gentiles, and as a result their sins have been heaped up to the limit and the wrath of God has come upon them at last. When we look at this last statement, we can actually view it from a multifaceted perspective, and we can do so in four ways: first, historically in regard to the Babylonian exile, which you can read about starting in the eighth chapter of Ezekiel; second, prophetically with regard to the destruction of Jerusalem, which would happen in A.D.70; third, with regard to end-times judgment at the second coming of Christ; and fourth, with regard to salvation itself. As one scholar writes, "God's promised wrath for unbelievers is so certain that it is spoken of as having already come." It's likely from the context of Paul's remarks that this last angle is the one to which he is referring as he talks about the Jews who persecute Christ's people.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, let's go back to the main point from the first portion of the text: have you considered lately the power and impact of the working of God's Word in your life? Have you considered the blessings associated with being immersed in the Word of the Lord on a consistent basis? How is your life different because of the outpouring of God's gracious promises in your life? And finally, if you have come to know the reality of the joy of God's presence and power through the working of His Word, are there people you know who could benefit from being in God's Word as much as you have benefited from it? If so, I have three easy words for you: "Click and Send." May God bless you to be a blessing as you share His Word of life and Salvation with a world that needs to hear it - and remember, this ministry is one great, non-confrontational, non-threatening way to do it. Take care, and we'll see you tomorrow.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

Getting Started

As we get started today, we'll be closing off the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians by noting Paul's longing to see that church again. Our focus: present desire, future fulfillment.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

17But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. 18For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us. 19For 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? 20Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

I was talking with a close friend of mine last week from California about everyday life kind of stuff, and after a while, our conversation turned to what's going on in our respective ministries. He serves on a large team in a specialized capacity, and he has lots of interaction with his colleagues. I, on the other hand, am pretty much on my own right now. He deals with challenges and opportunities within a large corporate structure, while I deal with just a few people on a limited basis. He lives very close to the center of his ministry activities, while the majority of my ministry activity, at least at this particular time in my life, is in the virtual world.

My friend is concerned for me because of my relative isolation, and to tell you the truth, he has a valid point. The life we live here in the country is one we've chosen to live and it's one we love. We're involved in our church; my wife, children and I are engaged in ministries we feel are helping others; and we believe we are helping to expand God's kingdom. But sometimes it gets lonely. Sometimes I miss serving a large, dynamic church. And sometimes I wish that I could have all my old colleagues and parishioners with me again to partner with and dream with and with whom I can work to build the body of Christ.

As we get going today, let me reiterate that the life I'm living is a life I've intentionally created and it's one to which I am very devoted. I'm not throwing a pity party and inviting you to cry in your beer for me. What I am doing is introducing a section of God's Word that I think we can all probably relate to in one way or another, and I've simply shared how I myself relate to it. What we have is person who is apart from people he loves and cares about. He wishes he could be with them. Various circumstances have prevented him from visiting. It would be useless to obsess over all of the whys and wherefores of his inability to be in their midst, so instead, he does the next best thing: he expresses his sentiments toward them in writing; he loves them through a letter.

Verse 17: In verse 17, Paul makes it clear that it was never his intention to leave the Thessalonians as he did. Rather, he and his companions were taken from the Thessalonians, forcibly separated from them against their will. If we go back and remember yesterday's session where Paul used a mother/father metaphor to illustrate the way he cared for these people, we might extend that to this verse and say that Paul is lamenting the way he has been removed from his beloved spiritual children. He's quick to point out, though, that they have not been orphaned. Though the distance may be physical, it isn't in any way a separation of the heart. In fact, it's his love for them and his deep spiritual connection with them that feeds his desire to be with them in person.

Verse 18: In verse 18, however, we are told that in spite of many attempts - the text says that Paul and his fellow workers desired over and over again to go back to the Thessalonians - for some reason, Satan was able to hinder them. We're not told what that hindrance was and we can only guess at how the enemy kept thwarting them. We do know, though, that one of Satan's chief activities is to try and destroy the church, and though the gates of hell will never prevail against it, it doesn't keep him from literally doing his damndest to wreak havoc. Read your Bible and you'll see the devil mentioned as being present in many of the early New testament churches. Remember, our warfare is a spiritual one, and the enemy continually prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he can devour. Is his defeat sure? Absolutely. But for a little while yet, there will be times when he is able to slow the advance of the victors, and this appears to have been one of those cases. Yet God will take that bump in the road for Paul and turn the situation into one which does serve to advance the Gospel, as we'll see in the next chapter. Even Satan is a servant of Almighty God, unwilling though he is!

Verses 19-20: Paul himself seems to allude to that truth as in verses 19-20 he abruptly drops the subject of Satan's menace and moves on to things more worthy of his focus and the focus of the beloved people to whom he is writing. What is that focus? The hope, joy and crown of his rejoicing, which is the fact that at the coming of the Lord Jesus, the Thessalonians will be found in Christ. Here we have the second eschatological, or end- times reference of the letter. No matter what this earthly life holds; no matter how great the persecution; regardless of how the devil and his minions seek to hinder and destroy the people of God; through faith in our Savior, whose life death and resurrection brought triumph over sin death and the devil, we have the victory! Paul says that that truth, as it encompasses the life of the Thessalonian church, is his and his fellow workers' glory and joy.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, be encouraged by these words. Some of you may be new Christians and there are times when you've surprised by the conflict that has come your way because of your stand for Jesus. Hold fast to your faith and don't give up. God will lead you through. Some of you are old saints; you've been on the road for a long time and you're weary of the world. Rest in the fact that your inheritance in the Lord Jesus is secure, and that the reason you remain in this life is because your heavenly Father is still using you for His kingdom. Seek Him out and ask Him to sustain you, and you will finish the journey strong. Wherever you may be on the road right now, take comfort that Jesus has said to you "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." With you in the great times; with you in the terrible and trying times; with you in the in-between times; with you right now. He will never leave you or forsake you, and He will be faithful to bring you home. Take care, and we'll see you back here on Monday.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Getting Started

As we get started today, we come upon what might be a surprising revelation as we go through this letter. Since Paul could not lead the team back to Thessalonica, he sent someone else as a representative. Our focus: the ministry of Timothy.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

1So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker[a]in spreading the gospel of Christ, to

strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. 4In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent Timothy to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.

At the little church I serve here in rural Missouri, we have a lot of great families who have a lot of great kids. Some Sundays we have more kids in church than we do adults, and it's wonderful and joyful and fun. Since we have so many kids, we've started a children's ministry to nurture their faith in a more intentional way, and since I'm a big kid myself it's one of my favorite things to be a part of. Last month, though, I was sick. Too sick to go and play my guitar, too sick to run around and play games, too sick to eat hot dogs and cupcakes, too sick to teach. Instead of canceling the evening, which I knew would be a disappointment, I sent someone else to play and run and eat and teach on my behalf: my wife Linda. Linda, if anything, is at least as good and probably better at all of those things than I am, and so I knew that things would be in good hands with her at the helm.

It's nice to be able to depend on competent people, isn't it. Not only does it remind us of the fact that the Lord has put many gifted people in our midst, it also helps us to see that we are not indispensable and that God has all kinds of different ways to accomplish His purposes in this world.

Paul was a man who deeply understood that truth. If the Lord could take him, a man who had once persecuted the church of Christ, and turn him into its greatest missionary - well, then the Lord could do anything with anyone at any time. Paul also knew that the Lord had provided him with an exceptionally gifted ministry team in Silas and Timothy. And because Paul was so concerned for the believers in Thessalonica but couldn't go back there without causing a huge ruckus and perhaps even endangering many lives, he sought another way to do the ministry that needed to be done there. His solution was Timothy.

Verse 1: In verse 1, Paul indicates that the concern he and the others felt for the Thessalonian church became so acute that they couldn't let things go any longer. Something had to be done; someone had to get back there and encourage the congregation. The decision? Paul and Silas would stay behind in Athens where they were currently residing, and they would send Timothy to represent the team. Now, what you want to understand here is that Paul is explaining something that has by this time already occurred. It's a prequel of sorts. Timothy has gone to Thessalonica and already returned to Paul and Silas, which will become evident when we get to verse 6. I mention it now so that you won't be confused as you try to link together the chain of events.

Verse 2: In any event, in verse 2 Paul affirms Timothy's status as a brother in Christ, a minister of the Lord, and a co-laborer with him and Silas in the Gospel of Christ. In other words, Paul is saying "When we sent Timothy to you, we sent someone not simply approved by us, but someone who is a very part of us and who was completely acceptable in God's sight to be a worker among you." And what was Timothy's primary task to be among them? Well, it was a two-fold ministry: he was to establish them in the faith, that is, ensure that their beliefs were in accordance with the Scriptures and with the doctrine of the apostles; and he was also to encourage them in the faith, meaning that he was to build them up and strengthen them, especially since they were suffering so much persecution as followers of Christ and had seen their ministers undergoing the same.

Verses 3-4: Verses 3-4 actually flesh that out for us in a little more detail: Timothy was to establish and strengthen them concerning their faith for the very reason that they not be shaken by the afflictions they were seeing and enduring as new believers. In fact, Paul goes on to remind them that he had actually been appointed for such suffering, had told them beforehand that he would have to endure it - and so they weren't to become discouraged by it and wonder about the legitimacy of their faith or whether the Christian movement was doomed to fail. No...Paul says that the difficulties the Thessalonians have witnessed in his ministry and that of his co-workers, as well as what they have experienced themselves, should if anything serve to strengthen their resolve.

Verse 5: So verse 5 puts a cap on it for us. Paul summarizes and says once again that when the time came that he could no longer endure wondering about how they were doing, when he became concerned to the point that he worried about Satan disheartening the congregation and undoing the hard kingdom work that had already been done there, he had to make a way, and so he sent Timothy. Timothy would not only do good work among the Thessalonians; he would also return to Paul and Silas and give them a report about how the church was doing. Tomorrow we'll see what kind of report Timothy ended up bringing back to Athens, and you'll want to be sure and join us for the news, because it's good news indeed!

Wrapping Up

For now as we wrap up, let me just end with this: may you yourself be established and encouraged in the Lord Jesus today. Rejoice in the "Pauls" and "Timothys" in your own life - those whom God has sent to minister to your heart and strengthen you in your faith. Pray for your pastors, be involved in the ministries of your congregation, be faithful in meeting together with your church family for worship, and yes, patiently endure suffering when it comes because of Christ. God will be faithful to complete the good work He has begun in you, and not even persecution for His name's sake will deter His plan for your life. Joy to you in our risen Savior - we'll see you tomorrow!

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

Getting Started

As we get started today, we're going to hear about Timothy's time with the Thessalonians from when he was sent by Paul and Silas to check in on the church. Our focus: faith and love and standing firm.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

6But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. 7Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? 10Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

When was the last time you got some good news? How did it make you feel? How did it affect your day? What did you do when you heard it? Who did you tell about it?

Aren't those fun questions to think about? They're fun to think about because they bring back good memories. Good news makes an impact, doesn't it. It has a transforming effect on the person who hears it. It has the power to turn a bad day into a good day and a good day into a great day, and when it's all said and done, life is all the more worth living because of it.

Sometimes when we read our Bibles we forget that with the exception of our Lord Jesus, the men and women on its pages are really no different than we are. They experience the things we experience, feel the things we feel, do the things we do, and need the things we need. And that includes the need to get good news every now and then! In today's reading, that's exactly what we see happening as Paul recounts the good report brought to him by Timothy following Timothy's visit to the Thessalonian church.

Verse 6: Verse 6 starts off by telling us the nature of what that good news is. When Timothy got to Thessalonica and made an assessment of how things were going in the church there, he found three really great things to share with Paul and Silas: first, their faith was strong - that is, there remained among them a solid trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember, this was one of the things Paul had been worried about. Had the conflict been too great, had his absence as a shepherd been too long, had Satan had too great an influence on this young body of believers? To his great relief and delight, the answer to all of those things was "no." On the contrary, the Thessalonian Christians had been steadfast in holding to the Gospel in spite of all that had come against them. Second, Timothy was able to report that not only was the faith of the Thessalonians strong, but one of the ways it manifested itself was in their fervent love for one another. This love was evidence that things were as they should be: their lives bore one of the genuine marks of a people belonging to God. Finally, the third thing that Timothy was able to report back to Paul and Silas was that the church in Thessalonica had not forgotten them. In fact, they longed to see Paul as much as he longed to see them.

Verse 7: So, what kind of an impact did that good news have on Paul and the rest of his team? Verse 7 tells us that it was a great comfort. Comfort because they could rejoice and glorify God for sustaining His people; comfort because they now knew that they had not labored in vain; and comfort because their own current afflictions would now be easier to bear as they remembered the faith, love, and affection of their Thessalonian brothers and sisters.

Verse 8: In verse 8, Paul even goes so far as to say that the steadfast faith of the Thessalonians - a term which is illustrative of an army that refuses to retreat even though it is under attack - is what sustains his own life and the life of his companions. As one version puts it, "For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord."

Verses 9-10: In verses 9-10, Paul closes off by returning to what is now a familiar theme for us: a theme of thanksgiving and rejoicing over the progress that this young church is making in its walk with the Lord, fervent prayer that they will continue in such manner, and also prayer that he and his fellow workers will be able to see them again face to face to help them in their faith, or as the text says, to supply what is lacking. Since Paul planted this church, he has an especially heartfelt desire to make sure that the Thessalonians have someone to shepherd them. Certainly he wants to be there to ensure that things go well in that regard.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, let's review very briefly the substance of Timothy's report to Paul, the report that made for such good news. First, the Thessalonians evidenced a deep faith; second,

they evidenced Christ-like love for one another as an expression of that faith; and third, as they endeavored to stand fast in the Lord Jesus, one thing that helped them to do that was their remembrance of Paul, Silas, and Timothy; their example and their work among them. My prayer as we end our time together is that we all be blessed with the same kind of good news in our lives – that we be marked by ongoing growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus like the young Christians at Thessalonica, and that like the Thessalonians we also have cause to remember great spiritual leaders who have touched our lives. There are many men and women who have helped to shape my faith – and I bet you can say the same. Thank God for those people today, and rejoice in their memories. Take care, and we'll see you again tomorrow.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Getting Started

As we get started today, we come to a terrific section of prayer and blessing. Our focus: seeking God for what only He can do!

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

We just had a wave of tornados go through our village and the surrounding countryside...six separate twisters from four separate squall lines over a period of about 12 hours. While we came through okay, a lot of people just a mile north had a pretty bad time of it. Barns were flattened, porches and roofs were ripped off of homes, livestock shelters were demolished as they tumbled through the fields, and some of our Amish neighbors lost their windmills. The only thing that happened to us was that we lost our natural gas service for a couple of days. It turned out that enough homes had pipe damage that they turned off the main line to ensure everybody's safety.

Now our community is in cleanup mode. Everybody's out shoveling debris and throwing things into construction dumpsters. Every once in while somebody finds something out in their pasture or along the road that they thought they had lost for good, and so there's some rejoicing in the midst of the loss. One of our friends just called to say that they found their kids' trampoline caught in the top of a big oak tree a half mile away and that it doesn't seem to be damaged at all – but they haven't figured out how they'll get it down yet.

While everybody's doing everything they know to do in the aftermath of the storm, there are some things that they can't do. They can't write themselves checks from their insurance companies; they have to wait. They can't pop down to the lumber yard, grab supplies, and start rebuilding; most of them will need contractors for that. They can't wipe away the fears of their children either, or the memories of being up all night huddled in a corner of the basement or cowering under a mattress in the bathtub listening to the warning sirens go off. Only time, and for some, counseling, will help to alleviate those things. As self-sufficient as we'd all like to be, sometimes we have to look to others to provide what we can't provide for ourselves. The past couple of days have been a powerful reminder of that.

In today's reading, we don't have anything as jarring or physically impactful as a tornado going on, but what I do want you to notice is that everything Paul says in these verses, while very important, is also passive. They're things that he himself cannot do, things the Thessalonians cannot do. In every case, they are things that must be left to Someone else. Paul and his coworkers have done a boatload of work in establishing the church in Thessalonica, and they continue to do all they can to strengthen and encourage the believers there. But though they are doing all they know to do, Paul makes clear by his words that they also understand one of the spiritual realities of their situation: sometimes they have to look to Another to provide what they can't provide themselves.

Verse 11: In verse 11, the first thing that Paul must entrust to someone else – and of course, that Someone Else is the Lord Himself, God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ – is the making of a way to get back to the Thessalonians in person. Paul has tried to do this on his own time after time, and yet Satan has prevented his every attempt. God knows Paul's heart in this matter, God knows what the Thessalonians need, and if it is God's will that Paul, Silas, and Timothy return to the congregation there, God will guide and God will provide.

Verse 12: Verse 12 shifts from Paul's personal desire to get to the church to the desire he has for the church: namely, that they continue on the path that they are already on. Remember how Timothy was able to come back from his visit and report the abounding love that the Thessalonians had for one another? Paul's prayer here is that God will continue to increase that love, so much so that it overflows, having an impact not just on the body of Christ in that place but on all people in the city. Paul knows that the power of God can bring the Thessalonians to a place where their influence becomes intrinsically and explicitly, yet completely naturally, evangelistic.

Verse 13: Finally, in verse 13 Paul gives one more reason for his desire that God increase the love of the Thessalonians: that God will also establish their hearts "so that they will be blameless and holy in the presence of God the Father" when the Lord Jesus comes back. This is now end-times reference number three in this letter as Paul endeavors to keep the promised return of Christ continually before his readers. In addition, this prayer that God establish and strengthen the Thessalonians serves as a transition point for Paul; as we move into the next chapter we'll find him really begin to center in on issues of practical Christian living.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for today, my prayer for you is the same as Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians: that God will do wonderful things in you that you cannot do for yourself. May He increase your love, increase it to the point that it flows through you and overflows out of you into the midst of a community that needs to be impacted by it. And may you, by growing in love, also grow in the strength of our Almighty God - that by it you in turn grow in holiness of life, which will rejoice your heart. God is faithful, and though I say it often I will say it again: He will delight to do those things in abundance.

You might well imagine that my own centeredness right now is on the goings on in my neighborhood. Though I do this very rarely, I would finally today ask that you pray for our storm victims here, asking that God will also do for them what they cannot do for themselves. I do thank you very much! Take care, and we'll see you back here next time!

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Getting Started

As we get started today, our letter takes a decidedly prescriptive turn as Paul encourages his readers to live lives of purity as followers of Christ. Our focus: God's will and God's blessing!

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

1Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. 2For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. 3It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; 4that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; 6and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. 7For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. 8Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

When my kids go out to take care of the animals in the morning before school, especially during winter time, they wear what we call their "property clothes." Property clothes consist of heavy rubber boots, old, tattered coats, and raggedy old sweats. Property clothes are worn so that the muck and the mud inherent in dealing with goats, geese and chickens doesn't end up where it shouldn't. Because kids are kids, though, there have been times when the Property Clothes Rule has been breached. The result? A brand new pink suede jacket with goose poop all over it and a teary-eyed daughter to go with it, a pair of tennis shoes meant for gym class covered from top to bottom in mud and an angry boy indignant about having to wear them to school anyway, and an assortment of splatters and stains and tears on numerous other garments too numerous to mention. It has taken time, but through trial and error, our kids are slowly learning that their property clothes serve a twofold purpose: to set them apart *from* dirt and at the same time set them apart *to* cleanliness.

In today's reading here at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul begins to talk to us about the importance of sanctification - that is, the importance of being set apart. What does that entail? It entails ongoing progress in a life of godliness: being set apart from sin and likewise, being set apart to holiness. We don't do this in order to be saved; we do it because we have been saved. We've been made new. Harkening back to our study from Colossians, you'll remember that we've been given new, holy garments to put on as God's people, and as such, isn't it natural that in accordance with our new nature we'll want wear them in all their beauty and refrain from soiling them? God's aim in this is not to constrict us; His aim is to shower us with His love and His favor; to bless us. He knows that being set apart to lives of holiness will bring us joy as His children, and that's why He is faithful in His Word over and over and over again to call us to a sanctified life and to establish us in it by the power of His Spirit.

Verses 1-2: In the passage before us today, Paul is quick to point out that the instructions he is giving do not come from him, but from the Lord Himself. He mentions this right up front in the first two verses, doesn't he. In addition, verses 1-2 do two other things: first, they commend the Thessalonians for the lives they are already living - because their godliness is genuinely apparent to all - and second, they exhort and encourage them to abound in such living all the more. Why is that?

Verse 3: Verse 3 is very specific on that point: as we said a moment ago, it is God's will that they be sanctified, both for their personal blessing as well as for their witness to the world. We also want to remember that sanctification is a process that doesn't stop until the believer reaches heaven: as much as we may grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, the reality is that there's always more growing to be done. As pastor David Guzik says, "Christian maturity is never finished on this side of eternity. No matter how far a Christian has come in love and holiness, he or she can still abound more and more."

Verse 3 also points to Paul's particular point of emphasis here regarding sanctification: that of sexual purity. Why treat that to the exclusion of other issues? The natural explanation is that sexual license is the most prominent expression of the non-Christian lifestyles and belief systems present in Thessalonica, and it's a background which many, if not most, of these new Christians have come out of. The ancient writer Demosthenes showed very well that sexual virtue of any kind was essentially unknown in the ancient Roman Empire when he said, matter of factly, "We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the faithful guardianship of our homes." Hard to stomach, I know, but such was the case, and if you peel away the surface layers, I fear it's not too far afield of today's cultural practices either. But textually speaking, consider this: If you once practiced a religion that encouraged immorality on the basis of its teachings, imagine how strong a pull that would continue to be even once you'd left it behind. That's certainly one thing among many that the Thessalonians are contending with as new believers.

Verses 4-8: Understanding that as a backdrop for Paul's remarks, we can look at verses 4-8 together as a summation of his point. Sexual purity is to be one of the marks of God's people not only to distinguish them as being different from the world, but because sexual impurity is so physically, emotionally, and spiritually damaging on every level to those who engage in it. God does not want that for His beloved children. Does that make sense to you today?

Paul closes his instruction in this regard by giving four reasons for refraining from sexual impurity. First, because the Lord will unequivocally punish it. No one gets away with this sin – even if it is undiscovered by man. Second, because of our calling as God's people. That call is not to uncleanness, but to holiness; therefore, sexual immorality is simply inconsistent with who we are in Jesus Christ. The third reason that we are to refrain from impurity is that to reject God's call to purity is not a rejection of man, but of God Himself - and that's serious business. And finally, the fourth reason is simply this: We have been given the Holy Spirit, who empowers the willing, trusting Christian to overcome sexual sin. By His Spirit, God has given us the resources for victory; we are responsible to use those resources.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, I would imagine that this topic gives a lot of us a lot of things to think about. Let me encourage you to take a good hard look at where you're at with this particular aspect of sanctification. Thought, word and deed, how are you doing? Where do you need help? Who can you go to for some accountability and support in this area of your life? And finally, is there sin that you need to confess and repentance that needs to happen in this area of your life? God calls to you right now, not in judgment, but with an offer to forgive, heal, restore and refocus your life with regard to His great gift of sexuality. For those of you to whom the Scriptures have spoken today, may today be a day of new beginnings! Take care, and God-willing we'll see you back here tomorrow.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Getting Started

As we get started today, Paul continues to write to the Thessalonians about what constitutes a godly life. Not surprisingly, much of what he says flies in the face of convention - then and now. Our focus: a countercultural life for the glory of God!

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

9Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. 10And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more. 11Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, 12so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

You've heard me talk on occasion about the fact that we live among the Amish here in southwest Missouri. Not only does it make for a quaint environment, but more than anything we consider ourselves blessed to have such great neighbors. If I had to pick one passage from Scripture that would characterize our Amish folks, today's reading would be it.

Many of us think of the Amish in rather quirky terms because of their peculiar lifestyle and their isolation from the modern world. While those things are indeed a part of who they are, there are other, more substantive things that I would use to describe them. For instance, not only do our Amish friends have a deep and abiding respect for the Word of God, they also have a strong faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior. And when it comes to how they function as a community, their family lives and church lives and the manner in which they have fellowship with one another are incredibly admirable. I've never witnessed more genuine laughter and love and joy than when I see my neighbors gather to be with one another. The other thing that marks the Amish in our area is their resourcefulness. They are quiet and unassuming, and yet there isn't anything that they can't do. They're not afraid of hard work, and they bring a certain dignity to their labor that shows their sense of calling and vocation as God's people. They are, quite simply, content.

In today's passage, the kind of life I'm describing with regard to my neighbors is, in actuality, the kind of life that Paul is calling all of us to as people of God. I'm not talking about a backwards, down-home, simplistic existence, because I wouldn't characterize the Amish that way at all. Nor am I saying that you have to go back to a pre-modern horse and buggy mindset. What I am talking about is a biblically functional existence marked by the imprint of Christ on every facet of the community. Now - if you want to replace backwards with countercultural, down-home with principled and ordered, and simplistic with simple, then I think you're getting into some terminology that is in keeping with the text. But instead of me blathering on about things, why don't we go to the source and take a look at the verses that God has given to us!

Verses 9-10: In verses 9-10, Paul reiterates something he's already spoken of in his letter several times: love. This is his fourth mention of love, and it's the second time it is accompanied with both a commendation and an exhortation. In verse 9 is a compliment for the way that the Thessalonians are already living in love, followed in verse 10 with a charge that they abound in it all the more. Remember, over all else that characterizes God's people, love is the unifying covering that binds everything together, and one of the beautiful things about God's love is that since He is the source and the substance and the very personification of love, we can never exhaust it; there's always more of it... which I'm sure is one reason Paul is so adamant about

bringing it up so often. The reality of God's inexhaustible love is not just a theological truism, it also has very practical implications. Why? Because God's love has an ongoing, transformative impact on who we are and what we do. So - love more and more! Great concept, isn't it!

Verse 11: In verse 11 Paul moves on to talk about aspiring to lead a quiet life. Just what, exactly, does that mean and why is it important? Does it mean dumping the city for the country? No. Does it mean shutting out the reality of life around you - tuning out and turning off? No. Remember, let's look at these words in context: the Thessalonians are new believers, living under duress, and having to contend with the constant threat of persecution. They're also trying to be witnesses for the Lord Jesus in a community where people really need to hear the Gospel. There's a lot in their lives to jostle and uncenter them if they allow their focus to shift away from the sufficiency of Christ. So when Paul tells them to make it their ambition to lead quiet lives, he's talking about eliminating those things that will generate needless conflict. A quiet life refers to the absence of unnecessary social problems, the absence of unnecessary relationship squabbles. A quiet life is characterized instead by a soul that is at rest - a soul content in the knowledge and presence of God.

Verse 11 also carries with it two other commands, commands which also have a definite purpose attached to them. First, God's people are to mind their own business! Don't you love that? In his second letter to the Thessalonians, which we'll be getting into over the next couple of weeks, Paul addresses this subject again because it had apparently become a problem in the church. Do you know what he calls people in that letter who don't mind their own business? "Busybodies!" So let's go ahead and be blunt like Paul himself: to mind our own business means that we are not to be busybodies. Finally, Paul also writes that the Thessalonians are to work with their own hands. This is a reference to common manual labor, something which Greek culture looked down upon, but which Paul lifts up as noble and glorifying to God.

Verse 12: When we get to verse 12, we go beyond the inner reasons cited for the cultivation of these things and move to the outward reason for them. Simply put, as the Thessalonians live and abound in love, lead quiet lives, mind their business and work whatever task they've been given to do with dignity, it's not only going to bless them and lead to the meeting of their needs, it's going to impact those who are outsiders - those who do not yet have a saving relationship with the Lord Jesus. The life that Paul outlines for his brothers and sisters in the Lord is so different than that of the prevailing culture, so counter to what the people around them know and expect, that through it the name of Christ will be exalted and people will be drawn to Him through the example of His church.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, it seems to me that the application here is pretty straight forward, wouldn't you agree? I invite you to join me in some personal assessment as you consider the weight of this passage and its relation to your own life. Moving into the weekend, I do pray that your worship will be rich, that your involvement with your church will be deep, and that your interaction with others will be seen by you as an opportunity to exalt the name of Christ in your own sphere of influence - that people will be drawn to Him as a result! God bless you, and we'll see you back here on Monday.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

Getting Started

As we get started today, we find Paul beginning to move into another section on the end times. We'll look at the first portion today and the second portion tomorrow. Our focus: the sure comfort of the Gospel.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

13Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 14We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him

As a pastor, I have conducted many funerals over the years. As I've mentioned to you in the past, in the case of believers, while there is certainly sadness surrounding the death of a loved one there is also great rejoicing in knowing that that person has gone on into the arms of the Lord Jesus. One of my favorite parts of a funeral or memorial service is not the preaching, but the sharing of passages from God's Word which speak comfort and assurance to those who are in mourning. Today's passage from 1 Thessalonians almost always gets included in the many verses that I choose, because it is simple, it is powerful, and it is to the point. Let's briefly look at it together.

Verse 13: When we get into these verses, the first thing we have to ask ourselves is why Paul would be addressing the issue of death in the first place. Furthermore, why would he say that he doesn't want the Thessalonians to ignorant about those who have died? Let's read the verse again and then take it apart a little bit:

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

First, of course, we want to note that to "fall asleep" is the common euphemism used for those who have died, a description applying to the body, but not the soul. But again, why has Paul chosen to talk about it here? Well, let's start by pointing out what every Christian knows: Jesus is coming back. It's going to be the absolute apex of salvation history, and God's Word tells us very clearly that we should all be looking for that Day; that we should all be expectantly, with great anticipation, waiting for that Day; and moreover, that that Day is something which we are to see as imminent... that is, something that could come at any moment in time.

As new believers, the Thessalonians had embraced this truth, and joyfully so, just as we all do when we come to a saving knowledge of our Savior. What had thrown them for a loop, however, was this: since they had a clear understanding and belief that the return of Christ could very well happen in their lifetime, what about those who died before Jesus came back? Would they miss it? Would they be left out? John MacArthur asserts that perhaps these new Christians erroneously thought that those who died prior to the Lord's return would be excluded from the promises associated with it. That kind of an idea would quite naturally bring a great deal of concern, not to mention grief if they happened to lose a loved one. Paul, in response to their anxiety, sets the record straight and thus set their minds at ease.

Verse 14: How does he do it? In verse 14 he gives a clear and comforting statement about what happens when someone dies in the Lord. First of all, let's note that what happens is based on the fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus Himself. It's only through His victory over sin and

death and His authority over all things that anybody can partake of His promises, no matter what state their body is in. But here's what Paul says: Just as we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. In other words, as Jesus died and rose, we can have confidence that all those who die believing in Him will also rise to spend eternity with Him in Paradise.

The moment we die, our souls are immediately and eternally with the Lord. On the Last Day, our bodies will be resurrected as well. They will be changed to be glorious and imperishable like the body of our resurrected Savior, and we will live forever with Jesus. Depending on your particular view of the End Times, the order and manner in which those things will happen is up for vigorous discussion. But here is what's sure, regardless: our resurrection, our transformation, and our eternal dwelling place is absolutely sure in Jesus Christ, whether we die before His coming or are still alive when He returns - and that's something in which we can all rejoice! The verses we'll be looking at tomorrow continue this conversation, so I hope that you'll join us as we move forward with this topic.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, are you a person who grieves and has no hope when you consider the death of yourself or a loved one? If so, then be comforted by these verses. In Christ, you have nothing to fear. The Lord Jesus has purchased you with His blood to be His very own, He has prepared a place for you in heaven that where He is you may be with Him, and He has promised that through faith in what He has done for you, your eternal home is one in which you will physically abide, always and forever. The mind of man has not conceived, is not able to remotely consider, the immeasurable wonder of what God has prepared for those who love Him. Put your trust in Him today, and find rest for your soul. Take care, and we'll see you again next time.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

Getting Started

As we get started today, we come to the end of 1 Thessalonians 4, but we actually find ourselves in the middle of an extensive discourse on the end times that will take us through the middle of chapter 5. Our focus: the Day of the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

15According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18Therefore encourage each other with these words.

One of the more interesting and lively discussions that we have at our dinner table from time to time is about the return of Jesus. We all know He's coming, we all believe He's coming soon, and we all know that when He does come, we'll be with Him in glory because each of us has trusted Christ for our salvation. The liveliness of our conversation comes from our differing views on when we would like Him to come! Linda and I certainly love this life and enjoy all that the Lord has blessed us with here in this world, but we're both at the point where, to say along with

the apostle Paul, "...To depart and be with the Lord is better by far!" Our children, as you can imagine, are vehemently opposite in their own take on the matter! They see a world of promise and adventure ahead of them; they are eager to see their future unfold. They're excited about the prospect of what their lives might become as they grow older. They'd be content to wait awhile before hearing the sound of the trumpet. In the final analysis, we're all okay with whatever God decides to do and whenever He decides to come, because we all know that heaven is going to be beyond our wildest dreams and that indeed, to be with the Lord will be better than even the best life here. But it's interesting to consider the different perspectives of different people, even as we await His appearing!

In today's reading, we get to look a little bit more to the mechanics of the great Day of the Lord. There's much, admittedly, that we don't know, but the Lord has been gracious to reveal some of the wonder and glory that we'll see when He comes.

Verses 15-18, summary: Continuing on from our time yesterday, we see Paul in verses 15 and following explain further about the day of Christ's return. According to God Himself, who is faithful and who does not lie, here is what will happen: first, for those of us who are left, that is, for those of us who are still alive at the Lord's return, we will not be caught up to meet the Lord before those who have died in Him. What does the text say? The Lord will descend with a shout, announced by the voice of an archangel and the sound of the trumpet of God, which, by the way, the Old Testament prophets Zephaniah and Zechariah allude to as a trumpet of deliverance. At this, the dead in Christ will rise first. Remembering Paul's earlier words to the Thessalonians, who may have been questioning the fate of their dead, this revelation provides great comfort and assurance, doesn't it. Once all the dead in Christ have been raised, then we who are still alive will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

Now — what happens next in the text is curious. Here we've had this huge build-up. We've been given a dramatic picture of Christ's appearing. We've seen the dead in Jesus rise, joined thereafter by those who are still alive. We're all caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and THEN... then what? Paul simply says this: "And so we will be with the Lord forever." Certainly, there's more to the picture here! Certainly, Paul's intention is not simply to say, "And that's that." And to be sure, if you go through your Bible and look at all the references to the coming of the Lord and to our resurrection, there is more, and I encourage you to do that because you will absolutely thrill to see what is in store for you as a child of the Most High God, bought with the blood of His one and only Son. But that doesn't give us an answer for Paul's abruptness here. What does give us an answer is what follows: number one, Paul will continue to talk about the Day of the Lord in the next chapter - he's not finished yet; but number two, here at the end of chapter 4 Paul does what he has done at the end of every chapter, which is to mention the coming of Jesus as a way to encourage the Thessalonians to stay strong in their faith. In fact, that is his overriding reason for saying what he says, as he sums up in verse 18.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, perhaps a good way for us to look at this passage is in that very same context of encouragement. You'll notice that I have purposely stayed away from the big eschatological arguments that surround this topic. It's not my purpose here to assert Amillennialism over Premillennial Dispensationalism or to affirm or reject the idea of the rapture of the Church or to get into the intricacies of the various approaches to understanding apocalyptic literature in the Scriptures. I have views on all of those issues like every other Bible teacher, and there are forums where the discussion of those things is appropriate and helpful for

God's people. But my purpose here is to share with you the intent of the Word of God in any given passage, and here, it is meant to spur you on in your relationship with Jesus and to help you stay focused on the promise of His soon and coming return. In the final analysis, here is what this passage says to you and me: when Jesus appears, the dead in Christ will be resurrected and will participate in the Lord's coming for His own; when Jesus comes, the living will be reunited forever with their loved ones; and when Jesus comes, all of us who are in Christ will be with Him for eternity. Indeed, let us encourage one another with these words! God bless you, and we'll see you tomorrow.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-3

Getting Started

As we get started today, the Apostle Paul goes into detail about the Day of the Lord - by specifically avoiding detail! Our focus: What is necessary and what is not.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-3

1Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

When we lived in California and had the joy of receiving occasional visits from Linda's Midwest-based parents, we always had fun guessing about when they'd show up. They'd give us an approximation, of course, but if Dad got a wild hair and settled into a driving groove, they might get to our house a half-day, a day, or more ahead of schedule. Once, when we lived in the northern part of the state, they got to town while we were out of town and hung out by themselves for about 36 hours until we pulled in! It was always great to see them, but we learned early on to be ready in advance for their arrival.

In the passage we're looking at today, Paul is continuing to talk to the church in Thessalonica about how things will be when the Lord Jesus returns. Looking back, we'll recall that he's already said what the Day of the Lord will look like: when Jesus comes, He will come with a shout and the trumpet call of God. The dead in Christ, that is, those who have died believing in the Lord Jesus, will rise from their graves. After that, those who are still living will join them in the clouds, and they will all meet the Lord in the air. It's a stunning picture, even though it's just one part of the canvas, as it were. Now, however, Paul moves beyond what that Day will look like and on to how that Day will arrive.

Verse 1: And interestingly, the way he introduces the subject in verse 1 is by saying that for these believers in Thessalonica - as well as for every other believer, by the way - times and dates aren't the issue at hand. They're not to be the focal point. Why does he not need to write to them about times and dates (or times and seasons as some versions translate it)? Because there isn't a need. There isn't a need because number one, no one, not even the Lord Jesus, knows the time or the date - only the Father knows. To predict the return of the Lord as many religious leaders have done over the years is not only an exercise in futility, it is at the least a misreading and at the worst a blatant disregard for the clear teaching of Scripture.

Verse 2: There's no need because number two, the Thessalonians already understand quite clearly (as the text points out in the second verse) that the Day of the Lord is going to come like a thief in the night. Paul in his initial ministry to these young believers had instructed them on this matter - we know this from looking at 2 Thessalonians 2 - and so he has no need to cover it again in detail. And besides, it's pretty basic. You don't schedule your home to be robbed, do you? Of course not. It's not a calendar kind of a thing. You don't have it down in your Blackberry for 2:00 PM Thursday. You have no way of knowing when it might happen. So it is, Paul says, with the Day of the Lord. People will be saying "peace and safety," thinking everything is going great, and yet suddenly they will be destroyed.

Verse 3: Let's look at one more illustration Paul uses about the coming of that Day: that of labor pains coming upon a pregnant woman. In my first church we had a young woman who went into labor, and everything happened so quickly that they didn't make it to the hospital in time for the birth. Instead, her husband ended up helping her deliver the baby on the side of the interstate in the back seat of their Honda. It was sudden, and it was inescapable. When it's time, it's time, and nothing will stop the inevitable from coming to pass. As labor comes without warning, so shall come the second advent of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wrapping Up

Wrapping up, let's think about those two illustrations for just a moment. In the case of a thief who comes in the night, you can't know when he's planning to sneak in, but you can work to secure your home beforehand so that you're always as ready as you can be should he come calling. It's the fool who is imprudent and careless with things of great value. In the case of pregnancy, you know that in the fullness of time labor is indeed going to come. As that time grows closer you take steps to prepare, don't you.

I want you to notice that each of these illustrations not only includes suddenness, but pain. And really, in this section of the passage that is Paul's intent. Why? Because the point is that for those who are found to be unprepared, who are found to be apart from a saving relationship with Christ at His return, the Day of the Lord will for them be a sudden and terribly painful day of loss and destruction. Are you in Christ? Are you ready for His return? If so, wonderful. If not, now is your time to turn to Him. Don't delay. If you know me at all, you know that I'm not a hellfire and brimstone kind of a guy. But please hear me say this: the Bible says that today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart to Him. Now is the day of Salvation. This moment is the only one guaranteed you. Come to the Lord.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus Christ, for any of my friends right now hearing this or reading this who have never been brought to you before, who have never been turned from their sins, who have never experienced the joy of your salvation, I present them to you now. Lord, hear them as they come to you; as they put their trust in you to be saved; as they turn away from their old lives and ask for your healing and your peace. Embrace them with your love and forgiveness, and give them full assurance that by your grace, through faith in your life, your death, and your resurrection, their eternal destiny is sure - and it's with you. Thank you Lord; in your precious name I pray, amen.

If you have just prayed with me, I'd love to hear from you. Drop me a line, won't you? To all of you, I hope the rest of your day is a great one, and I look forward to being back here with you tomorrow. God bless you, and take care!

1 Thessalonians 5:4-6

Getting Started

As we get started today, Paul moves from talking about those not ready for the Day of the Lord to those who are ready. Our focus: children of light.

1 Thessalonians 5:4-6

4But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.

I've talked to you before about the perils of darkness. When it's dark you stumble over things. When it's dark you get disoriented and lose your way. When it's dark, you can't see where you're going, and when it's dark, you don't see what's coming at you either.

In the section of Scripture we've been looking at over the past few days, the apostle Paul has been talking about the return of our Lord Jesus, the Day when He will come back for His own and judge the world and all that is in it. We've had words of comfort and words of counsel, and yesterday there were words of conviction with regard to all who reject the saving work of the Christ at the cross; to all who walk in spiritual darkness. The Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, and as labor pains suddenly come upon a pregnant woman, so the return of Jesus will come upon them. They will not see it coming until it is too late, and they will not escape destruction.

Verse 4: In today's reading, however, Paul changes his emphasis. Shifting from a third person plural in verse 3 where he refers to those who will not escape, in verses 4 and following he switches to a second person plural voice. In other words, "They" (third person plural) will not escape destruction, but "You" (second person plural) - that is, you who are in Christ, you to whom I am writing and encouraging - have no need to fear. Why? Because as verse 4 says, You are not in darkness so that the Day of the Lord should surprise you like a thief. The Day of the Lord still comes, and it is still unannounced beforehand. The difference is that it will not surprise or overtake those of us who are in the Lord Jesus. On the contrary, one of the hallmarks of our faith is that we are constantly looking for the arrival of that Day. We anticipate it. We long for it. And the reason is because we are not in darkness, but in the light. If you'll remember back to our study of Colossians, one of the things we learned in the first chapter of that letter is that in Jesus Christ we were delivered from the dominion of darkness and were brought into the kingdom of light. That transfer changed everything, past tense, present tense, and as we see here, for all eternity.

Verse 5: In verse 5, Paul affirms the truth of what he is saying by making a declarative statement: "You are all children of the light, children of the day." And then, including himself and his coworkers in the mix, he finishes by saying, "We do not belong to the night or to the darkness." Remember, one of the great truths about our great and mighty God is that He is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. Therefore, as His children - children of light - neither do we live in the darkness.

Verse 6: Since that is the case; since we have been delivered from one kingdom and into another; since we are marked by light and do not any longer belong to the darkness, what, then, is the logical outflow of that? Paul says it is verse 6, and it is a strong and serious charge: we are not to be like others, who are asleep, but we are to be alert and self-controlled. Dr. John

MacArthur puts it this way: “Because believers have been delivered from the domain of darkness, they are taken out of the night of sin and ignorance and put into the light of God. Because Christians are in the light, they should not sleep in spiritual indifference and comfort, but be alert to spiritual issues around them. They are not to live like the sleeping, darkened people who will be jolted out of their coma by the Day of the Lord, but live alert, balanced, godly lives under control of the truth.” I think that’s especially well said, and I think it captures the gravity of the text in just the way it was intended for us to hear it as God’s people.

Wrapping Up

So - as we wrap up for the day, what shall we say? Well, we can certainly rejoice, being reminded that as children of the light we need not fear the Day of the Lord. We can certainly rejoice in the reminder that we are children of the light, and that we have become so by the rescuing hand of our Lord Jesus. At the same time, this text is also a call for us to examine our lives, and to consider our call to live as the new creatures in Christ that we are. Are we awake and watchful, or are we asleep and indifferent? Are we in fact walking in the light as our Lord is in the light, or are we toying with darkness? When we gather together again tomorrow, Paul will put a cap on all of this, and he’ll give us some practical, purposeful instruction on how to maintain a spirit of watchfulness as we await the glorious Day of the Lord. Do be sure and join us, and in the mean time, the joy of the Lord be upon each one you!

1 Thessalonians 5:7-11

Getting Started

As we get started today, we find ourselves at the close of Paul’s words on the return of the Lord. Our focus: let the night be night and the day be day.

1 Thessalonians 5:7-11

7For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 8But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 9For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

When I think back on my college days, I wasn’t much of a partier. That’s a good thing for the most part, but it also means that when I did go out and get a little wild, I never handled it very well because I wasn’t used to it. Like many college students I was not a habitual drinker, but did have occasional bouts of drinking where two things invariably occurred: first, I made a fool out of myself, and second, I ended up absolutely miserable and unable to function the next day. I’m not proud of those incidents of my youth, and I absolutely would counsel any of you out there in that season of life not to make the poor choices I made, because at the very least the memories stay with you, and at the very worst you endanger yourself and others in a whole lot of different ways!

Verse 7: The reason that I bring up those unfortunate and embarrassing college moments of my past is because they were stupid. And interestingly, Paul uses drunkenness as an illustration of spiritual stupidity in our reading today. Remember, Paul has been distinguishing for us the difference between darkness and light, the difference between being of the night and being of

the day. He has reminded us that as children of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are of the light and are not to be as those who are in the dark. In verse 7, Paul equates the stupor inherent in spiritual darkness to those who sleep and those who get drunk in the night. They are fools; they are unable to function; and they will be miserable when the Day of the Lord comes. This is a restatement of what Paul mentioned to us in verse 3: that the coming of the Lord will completely overtake those who are not ready for its arrival.

Verse 8: Continuing on into verse 8, Paul once more sets believers - children of the light - in sharp contrast to those who wallow in the darkness. As children of the light we are to be sober and alert, not drunk and asleep. How are we to exercise that alertness? By arming ourselves against the darkness, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet. Paul's word picture here is similar to what he shares with the Ephesians when he talks to them about spiritual warfare and the armor of God. In the battle dress of a Roman soldier, the breastplate covered all the vital organs. Faith and love are equally vital in the Christian life to protect us from the flaming arrows of the enemy and the advance of temptation. They provide a covering for us to effectively resist and defend against spiritual attack. We can look at the helmet the same way: it was absolutely vital in battle, and so the helmet of salvation is for us in our spiritual battle against darkness. Notice that Paul once again has brought faith, hope and love together, just as he did at the beginning of the letter. We would be remiss to consider these words without also remembering his words to the Corinthian Christians in his letter to them: "So these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

Verses 9-10: As we move into verses 9-10, Paul wraps this topic up, and fittingly, he wraps it up with an explicit expression of the Gospel itself. By now you'll notice this as a pattern in Paul's writing; he always takes the opportunity to point his readers back to the message of salvation in Jesus Christ as the foundation for all that he says. In this instance he uses it to remind the Thessalonians of God's love: that God did not appoint them to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through the Lord Jesus. And then, going all the way back to his remarks in chapter 4, Paul closes off by saying that whether we are alive in Christ or have died in Christ, the Gospel has come that we may live together with Him.

Verse 11: Once more, what are we to do with that knowledge? Verse 11 echoes the last verse in chapter 4, doesn't it. We are to comfort and edify one another, encourage one another and build each other up. Not with platitudes and empty words and false promises, but with the powerful truth that the Lord is coming again - and that He is coming for us!

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day and go into the weekend, my prayer is that God will inspire you to be a genuine encouragement to others with the truth of that promise, and that likewise, He will use others to encourage you with the same. So often in our churches on Sunday and in our relationships with other Christians through the week, we lose the sense of urgency and joy that God really is coming for us, and that He is coming soon! That's a promise that cannot be taken from us, and even in the midst of the hardest times - perhaps especially in the midst of those times - the message of Jesus coming back to claim His own and the message that we are His, whether in life or in death, is one that we all need to hear over and over again. Be strong; live in the light; dress for battle...and don't stop listening for the shout of victory and the sound of the trumpet! God-willing, we'll see you again on Monday. Take care!

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

Getting Started

As we get started today, we now begin drawing near to the end of Paul's 1 letter to this group of believers in Thessalonica. As such, Paul will have many parting instructions, and now and over the next several days, we'll be looking at them. Today's focus: life in the church.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

12Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. 14And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

At one point early in my life as a minister of the Gospel, I served a church which, unbeknownst to me in the beginning, had an interesting history. While I won't get into specifics, what I will say is that it was a place in transition from old to new, it was a place where old power brokers were exerting all the influence they could muster to resist change, and it was a place where for a long while and for various reasons, the pastors who served there were not well-respected and didn't last. For me it was two years and out. Since my departure, the pattern in that church has been unremitting. They have had three more pastors, and much of the congregation has now left — with the exception of that core group of old power brokers.

At this point in my ministry, when I look back on that little church and consider its challenges I bear no ill will and harbor no bitterness. In fact, some of what I experienced there prepared me to serve the thriving ministry I went to afterward, and it directly contributed to the nonprofit ministry I now operate here on our farm in Missouri. But I do look back with a sense of brokenness and thoughts of "if only", and occasionally I wonder how it is that that congregation is even able to continue with all that troubles it.

I think about those things whenever I look at the Scriptures and see God's Word describing what the church is supposed to be like - like in today's reading from 1 Thessalonians. As we pick up toward the end of chapter 5, Paul, as he begins his closing remarks to a young fellowship of new believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, has some important things to tell them about their life together. If you'll think back to the introduction of our study several weeks ago, you'll recall that the Thessalonians are for all intents and purposes a church without a senior pastor at the moment. Not long after establishing the church there, Paul and his coworkers had been forced to leave, and though there is probably a fledgling system of elders or deacons in place, there's not much else. Certainly, one of the reasons Paul wants to get back there is to establish things more thoroughly in that regard.

Verse 12: Yet with respect for those who are working among them in some teaching or shepherding capacity, Paul spends the first portion of today's passage instructing the Thessalonians about how to treat such workers. The first point is honor, or respect. For those men among them who labor for the church, who are over the people in the Lord, and who admonish the people in the truth, respect is to be given.

Verse 13: Verse 13 continues: those who serve the church in this way are also to be held in high regard and in love because of their work. Let me be quick to point out that the love here

isn't based on the personality or likability of the individual, but on the fact that that person is serving the Lord as an undershepherd. In my nonprofit work I minister to pastors and other church workers going through difficult times, and one theme I find running through my work with them is that they very often feel that they are not liked or respected for the work they do. Naturally, of course, that has to go both ways, and sometimes ministers get into scrapes because they don't recognize the reciprocal nature of that truth. This issue of mutual love and respect is one of the linchpins that determines whether a ministry is healthy or not.

So - honor, respect and love are all important things in the relationship between pastor and people. But finally, verse 13 says one more thing to people in church about how they are to accord honor for their workers: they are to be at peace with one another. That's right - one of the ways in which you honor the work of your shepherd is by living in peace with the other folks in the congregation. It shows your respect for leadership and it shows that you have the good of the body in mind as you interact with your brothers and sisters in Christ. The text doesn't treat this as a separate issue, but rather, links it to the honoring of the minister.

Verses 14-15: Well, if verses 12 -13 are about the proper treatment of the pastors, verses 14-15 are about the proper treatment we are to give to one another. It's all about caring, really, and it's the kind of caring that goes deep, that gets beyond the veneer. It's the kind of caring that will point out something uncomfortable if the need arises, not to lord it over someone but to lovingly provide them with accountability. And it's the kind of caring that is always ready to go the extra mile for the sake of someone in need. What kind of things do we see Paul mention in the text? Those who are idle, or unruly as some versions translate it, are to be warned and brought back in line with the life of the church. Those who are timid or fainthearted, struggling with doubt or fear, are to be encouraged and emboldened. For the weak in the church - a reference to those lacking strength, whether moral or spiritual - they are to be held up and supported. And finally, it all ties together through having a spirit of patience and forgiveness, coupled with an attitude quick to act in love toward one another. As Paul says, "Always try to be kind to each other (those in Christ) and to everyone else (those who do not yet know Christ)."

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, what comes to mind for you when you think about your pastor? How are things going in the church? How are the people getting along? Would your congregation find affirmation in looking at these points? Could it perhaps find strength and direction from them? They're all important questions. God grant you wisdom as you consider them one by one, and may God richly bless you to be part of the good in it all. Take care, and we'll see you next time!

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Getting Started

As we get started today, Paul begins to share final words of instruction and encouragement with his readers. This short section of verses is one that is greatly beloved by Christians everywhere, and it's easy to see why! Our focus: The joy of God's will for us in Christ!

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

16Be joyful always; 17pray continually; 18give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

I don't know if it's a stage-of-life kind of thing or what, but in my contact with young men and women of college age, when they talk about Scripture and what parts of the Bible are especially meaningful to them, one of the most cited passages I hear is the one we're looking at together today. Whether they're kids involved in drama or music ministries, students studying for full-time church work careers, vocations in a secular field, or 18-20-somethings already in the work force, these words from 1 Thessalonians 5 have a big impact. When I ask them why, the answer I usually get is something like "It's just an awesome calling for how to live my life." If you're a theologian, I realize that your first impression is to want to pick apart that statement and say that it's simplistic and uninformed, but in doing so you'd be missing the forest for the trees. Actually, I think it's a brilliant, beautiful, textual answer, and it's one that's good for all of us to consider, no matter what our age or stage of life!

The instructions in these three verses are indeed an awesome calling for us as God's people. They are imperatives, that is, they are voiced as commands. They are clearly set forth as an explicit statement of God's will for us in Christ. And they have the capacity to shape our lives and the lives of the people around us in a profound and ongoing way. James Moffatt, a great Bible scholar of old, wrote of these verses, "To comment adequately on these diamond drops would be to outline a history of the Christian experience in its higher levels." If that's the case, then let's look at each diamond one by one!

Verse 16: Verse 16 is straight forward, isn't it: Rejoice always. Notice the word "always." Always means "whatever happens to come our way...." so this verse would indicate that we are to rejoice not only over happy things, but even over difficult things. Christians can rejoice always because their joy isn't based upon their circumstances, but upon the greatness and all-sufficiency of God. Circumstances change, but God doesn't! Listen to what C.H. Spurgeon, the great 19th century preacher, said on this point: "I am bound to mention among the curiosities of the churches, that I have known many deeply spiritual Christian people who have been afraid to rejoice. Some take such a view of religion that it is to them a sacred duty to be gloomy." Spurgeon continues, "Turn this book over and see if there be any precept that the Lord has given you in which He has said, 'Groan in the Lord always, and again I say groan.' You may groan if you like. You have Christian liberty for that; but, at the same time, do believe that you have larger liberty to rejoice, for so it is put before you."

Verse 17: In the next verse we have another gem: Pray without ceasing. Christians are to pray continually. We can't bow our heads, close our eyes, and fold our hands without ceasing, but those are postures of prayer, not prayer itself. Prayer is communication with God - and we can live each minute of the day in a constant, flowing, conversation with Him. Now certainly, there is great importance in taking regular, consistent time to shut out all other distractions and focus on our Lord to the exclusion of everything else. But there is also room - and great value - in every-moment-of-the-day fellowship with God. Pastor David Guzik says that there are many valuable implications to be taken from this verse:

- The use of the voice is not an essential element in prayer.
- The posture of prayer is not of primary importance.
- The place of prayer is not of great importance.
- The particular time of prayer is not important.

In short, as Christians there is never a time, place, or situation where we cannot pray! Isn't that a terrific reminder?

Verse 18: Finally, verse 18 brings us to the important Scriptural principle of gratitude: In everything give thanks. Notice that we don't give thanks for everything, but in everything. In many ways this is a restatement of the reason for which we rejoice: we recognize that our lives are not left to blind faith or to chance, but that God is absolutely in charge of all things. As such, we can entrust ourselves to His care, and we can be thankful in knowing that there is nothing He is unable or unwilling to do when it comes to our best interest and the best interest of His kingdom. Admittedly, this can be a hard row to hoe sometimes because God sees the Big Picture and we don't. But most assuredly, learning to give thanks in all things is one of the great marks and great blessings of a life changed by the Gospel. Going back to Spurgeon for a moment, he is profound as always when he says, "When joy and prayer are married their first born child is gratitude."

Verse 18 finishes up by tying the carrying out of these three things - rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks - to the good and gracious will of God. Why are these things God's will for us in Christ? First and foremost, God is worthy and deserving of these things; they are appropriate expressions of our spiritual act of worship in everyday life. But as always, God doesn't simply want these things from us; He wants these things for us, because He is the Giver and Provider of every good and perfect gift! He knows that they will enrich our lives in inestimable ways.

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, let me encourage you to try something: first, take a minute to memorize this passage. It's easy and it rolls off of the tongue with almost no effort at all. Once you've memorized it, just for the rest of the day today (or first thing in the morning if you're doing this study in the evening) be intentional about practicing it; ask God to work those things within you and then center in on each one. Choose to rejoice! Be in a constant state of prayer! Consciously make the decision to be thankful in everything. As you do that, I'm confident of this: you'll find that you want to do it more! After all, it's an awesome calling for how to live your life! Take care, and we'll see you again next time!

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

Getting Started

As we get started today, we'll continue to take a look at Paul's final instructions to the Thessalonians as he prepares to sign off. Our focus: the essence of an active, alert life in Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

19Do not put out the Spirit's fire; 20do not treat prophecies with contempt. 21Test everything. Hold on to the good. 22Avoid every kind of evil.

Have you ever woken up on a Sunday morning and the last thing you wanted to do was go to church? I feel like that sometimes too, but since I'm the pastor I usually don't have a choice in the matter! Though I'm a pastor, I'm also a regular everyday kind of a guy with regular everyday kinds of feelings, even when it comes to feelings of spiritual apathy now and then. I know what it's like to drag myself to church unprepared, ungrateful, and unrepentant, with no fire and no spunk and no readiness to rejoice in the presence of the Lord. We all have times like that, and

God understands it better than we understand it ourselves. But sometimes those occasional feelings of indifference rear their ugly heads in a stronger fashion, and when that happens it's easy for us to move from sporadic feelings of spiritual apathy to habitual avoidance of the things of God.

In today's reading, Paul is speaking to the Thessalonians about life in general and about worship in particular; in fact, we might summarize these verses by calling them important principles regarding worship. Let's briefly go through them.

Verse 19: Paul begins by telling these believers not to put out the Spirit's fire, which is a reference, of course, to the Holy Spirit. Some versions use the word "quench" in this verse, which refers to putting out a flame. How is it that we quench, or put out the fire of the Holy Spirit? We certainly do so by doubt, by indifference, and by out and out rejection of Him. But in a more subtle way, which is actually more critical to point out, we also put out the Spirit's fire when we lose our focus or become distracted, or when we make our worship man-centered instead of God-centered.

When it becomes all about us and our needs and our entertainment and our edification instead of the cross of Christ, we extinguish the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. What's the bottom line here? Let's put it in positive terms: in our lives as God's people, we are to be diligent in tending the fire of His Spirit; diligent in keeping it stoked and hot; diligent in maintaining an environment where the Spirit can flourish in our midst. Just as Timothy was to "fan into flame" the gift of God that was in him by the laying on of Paul's hands (2 Timothy 1:6), so we in accordance with our new nature in Christ are to consecrate ourselves, that is, set ourselves apart, for the work and will of God to be done in us.

Verses 20-22: In the final few verses here, Paul moves on to the issue of prophecy. In short, he tells the Thessalonians not to treat it with contempt, but to test it, holding on to the good and avoiding, discarding, what is evil or even has the appearance of evil. One thing you'll want to remember here is that at this point in time, though the people had the Old Testament, the New Testament was still being assembled, as it were. The canon of Scripture wasn't yet closed; what we know today as the Bible was still being written as various men were being carried along by the Holy Spirit. The gift of prophecy then, both in its foretelling and forthtelling aspect, still played a major role in the life of the early church. Many times this led to the maturation and edification of the people, but sometimes there was abuse, and counterfeit prophets were more than a cottage industry at the time. Thus, God's people were to test all they heard to ensure that it was in accordance and in keeping with what had already been revealed to them in the Scriptures.

So it is, by the way, in the church of today. I've said this before, but let me say it again: every one of us has the responsibility to be a Berean when it comes to being taught the Word of God. Some of you will recall that the Bereans were that noble group of people in the book of Acts who, after listening to Paul teach, would go home and diligently search the Scriptures to determine whether the things he said were true. You need to do that too - with my teaching, with your pastor's teaching, with the teaching of any radio or television ministries that you hear, and with your reading material. Moreover, if you happen to be part of a tradition where words of knowledge and tongues and the interpretation of tongues are valued or given precedence, this is a critically important habit for you to cultivate and put into practice. As Paul says, so I say - don't despise such prophecies, but test them. And how do you test them? Any and every

prophecy given must be held up against the standard of God's Word as He has revealed it to us in Scripture. If it is in accordance with what has been given to us there, then hold to it and rejoice in it. If it has any appearance whatsoever of being out of step or twisted, or if something almost but doesn't quite measure up, then you must reject it. God will never give a message to or through anyone that is contrary to the clear teaching of His Word.

Personally, I believe that in these last days we have no need for new prophecy, because the Scriptures are complete and are entirely self-sufficient. Hear the testimony of God's Word itself in the first chapter of Hebrews: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." Whatever you hold to with regard to the issue of prophecy, do remember this: evil and deception can show itself even in a spiritual setting, so it is important that you be on your guard, and do what? Test everything.

Wrapping Up

So - wrapping up for the day, what can we say in closing? Our worship as God's people, in and out of church, is to be characterized by care not to put out the Spirit's fire and carefulness when it comes to receiving and embracing the teaching we hear. I pray that you'll give heed to that, and I know that you'll be blessed by doing so. Have a terrific day, and I'll see you again tomorrow!

1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

Getting Started

As we get started today, we come to the end of our study of 1 Thessalonians with some fitting words of blessing and admonition. Our focus: God's unwavering faithfulness to His people in all things and in every way!

1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

23May 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. 24The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. 25Brothers, pray for us. 26Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. 27I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. 28The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

One thing that every homeowner experiences is the reality of unfinished projects. Our Missouri farm house, for instance, is well constructed and has good bones, but what it doesn't have is much in the way of finish. The insulation needs a major upgrade. The walls are flat and have no texture to them; you can even see the outline of the drywall tape and mud underneath the paint. We've had to put in new windows because the wind blew through the old ones more like they were screens than panes of glass, and the list goes on. A lot of the deficiencies in our home are due to age. Things are just worn out; they need to be replaced. And though I can't get everything done that needs to be done all at once, one day I look forward to completing the house so that through and through, it will be as new.

In a lot of ways, you and I as followers of Christ aren't much different than our homes. We are solid, but deficient; created in God's image, yet afflicted with the deteriorating presence of sin. So much needs to be done - and what's more, so much of what needs to be done is beyond our

ability to do. But the day is coming, says the Lord, when all that needs to be done in us will indeed be done. Because we cannot do it ourselves, He will do it. And because of that, each one of us can look forward to the day when finally, through and through we will be as new.

Verses 23-24: That's the essence of what Paul is saying as he signs off this first letter to the Christian church at Thessalonica. The God of peace, the One who has created us and redeemed us, will also sanctify us through and through, in every part; and because of the covering of Christ's blood which has cleansed us and made us perfect and righteous before Almighty God, we will be preserved, blameless, at the coming of our Lord Jesus. This is the final reference Paul makes to the second coming of our Savior, and actually, in this context it's a wonderful promise that includes a now application as well as a future application. Now, the lives we live in Christ are lived not according to our own strength or our own abilities, but according to the good and gracious working of His Spirit in us. By His Spirit we live as we have been called to live. By His Spirit we worship rightly. By His Spirit we aspire to all things godly. In essence, everything that Paul has been talking about with regard to Christian living over the past two chapters falls under this truth, and essentially, it's all about grace.

Remember, the idea behind the word sanctify is "to set apart" - to make something different and distinct, breaking old associations and forming a new association. For example, a dress is a dress; but a wedding dress is sanctified - set apart for a special, glorious purpose. It's in that way that God sets us apart for His special, glorious purposes - and make no mistake, as the text makes clear this setting apart is not our work, but His. Of course, when at last we are finally called away from this world to our true heavenly home, that work will be complete...our sanctification will be total, and we will dwell in newness of life without sin for all eternity!

Verses 25-26: In verses 25-26, we have a request for prayer and the call to give a greeting. The greeting here is standard, and Paul, if he were with them, would greet them with a holy kiss himself. We don't need to say much more on that. But regarding his request for prayer, think about this for a minute: Paul was an apostle, and the Thessalonian church was made up of young Christians. Yet even with that difference in spiritual maturity, Paul still believed he needed their prayers. What does that say to you about the power and importance of prayer? And by the way, this is such an important practice for us to engage in as believers...the practice of praying for those who work among us as ministers of the Gospel! As a pastor myself I can tell you beyond the shadow of a doubt that it is the prayers of God's people on my behalf that have sustained me, protected me, defended me, and deepened me over the years.

Verses 27-28: Finally, in the last two verses we see a charge that this letter be read to all the believers, as well as a final pronouncement of blessing on the Thessalonians' lives as God's people. Let's look at them one at a time.

First, some scholars say that the instruction given in verse 27 is an unusual statement, and to be sure, it is unique in Paul's writings. Many different reasons have been suggested for why Paul included the command that the letter be read to the church:

- Since this was his first letter, there was as of yet no established custom of the public reading of his letters, and he wanted to make sure the practice was established.
- Paul wanted to make sure that the church heard the letter first-hand, and not through intermediaries who might misstate his message.

- Perhaps Paul feared that people would look up passages in the letter that spoke to the issues that interested them the most, and ignore the other parts.

As to his parting word of blessing, I think it is worthy to note that nearly all of Paul's letters begin and end with the idea of grace. Remember, grace is God's unmerited favor, His bestowal of love and acceptance on us because of who He is and what Jesus has done. Grace means we can stop working for His love and start receiving it! To begin and end with a blessing of grace is a significant theological statement. In fact, for a final thought as we close off our time today, I can't think of a better way to do it than to share with you what James Denney, an early 20th century theologian, said in this respect: "Whatever God has to say to us – and in the New Testament letters there are things that search the heart and make it quake – begins and ends with grace. All that God has been to man in Jesus Christ is summed up in it: all His gentleness and beauty, all His tenderness and patience, all the holy passion of His love, is gathered up in grace. What more could one soul wish for another than that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ should be with it?" I wholeheartedly agree!

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day and conclude our study of 1 Thessalonians, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you! It's been my privilege to share God's Word with you from this great book, and I hope that you've gained new insight and a deeper faith from the time we've spent together. Tomorrow we'll continue on to Paul's second letter to this young church, and it will be interesting to see how things have progressed in their life together and what Paul is prompted by the Lord to say to them the second time around. Do join us, and as always, do invite someone new to study along. God bless you richly - we'll see you next time!