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Thessalonians

Jim Smith

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1 Thessalonians

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Background

1 Thessalonians is one of the earliest of Apostle Paul's letters. The generally accepted idea is that it was written from Corinth, somewhere between C.E. 50-52. So we are only 30 or so years from the resurrection of Jesus – very little time indeed.

Apostle Paul established the church in Thessalonica, (Acts 17) and then left, via Berea to Athens, where he spoke on the Aeropagus. (Acts 17:16 onwards) While he was there, he was worried about the Thess. Church, and sent Timothy to find out what was happening. (1 Thess. 3) Timothy came back with a good report, probably to Corinth.

So Apostle Paul settles down to write to Thess. Church.

1 Thessalonians 1

¹ Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.

Most letters from this period start like this – “From a to b greetings”
The Church is in “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” A powerful foundation, which reminds us that the church is God's creation, and he undergirds it with himself and the “Lord” (Jesus is Lord of the Church) “Jesus” (The Saviour who has died for this and every church), “Christ”. (The anointed one.)

A very powerful statement of what “church” is. We humans develop and use the church. But it is God’s creation - something we do well to remember.

“**Grace**” (Gk “Charis”). Apostle offers them “Charis” - anointing in the power of God, and “**Peace**”, (Gk “Eirene”) which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Shalom.”

As always, the Apostle gets down to business fast! He is writing to God’s created church at Thess. and he prays for them the strongest of blessings.

² We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³ We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here we see Apostle Paul’s pastoral heart. He remembers his church constantly in his prayers. What a challenge this is to Pastors and leaders. We are to pray continually for those in our charge - and it’s prayer from the heart, not from the intellect. His prayer is fuelled by the actions of the Thess. church:-

* **Work produced by faith.** True faith is busy. It’s our heartfelt response to our salvation. Sadly, so many of God’s people are not busy but lazy.

* **Labour prompted by love.** “Agape” love demands a response.

* **Endurance inspired by hope.** “Endurance” is a virtue lacking in so much of God’s work today. Yet the Christian walk is a tough one, and we have to tough it out. What gives us the courage to do this – “hope.” (Gk –“elpidos”) “Hope” is not strong word in English. But for Apostle Paul it was one of the strongest - hoping for the Lord’s return and the establishment of the New Jerusalem. This inspired the early Christians to get on with their task.

⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

We are “**loved by God.**” This expression is a perfect tense, which means that the act of love, once and for all in the past is still powerful for us today, and will be forever. We are “**chosen**”. God’s agape has settled on us. Let’s not get drawn into the teaching on election, but rejoice that we *are* chosen. Why?

Because of the Gospel, **which came not only with words, but with “power”, (Gk “dunamis”) “the Holy Spirit” and “deep conviction.”**

This is such a clear summary of the way in which the “euangelion” (“Good news”) works. There has to be content, (“words”) but content alone is not enough. We do well to note this - especially those churches which think that just proclaiming a verse to us about our situation is the answer to all our struggles. Proclaiming the word is only the beginning of a process. *The power of the resurrection and the power of him who raised Jesus have to be released into the words.* This means that all Gospel presentations have to be filled with the personality and emotion of Jesus. Our personalities and emotions will have to be involved. There is no place in the Bible for cold forensic presentations, or the recitation of some prepared texts.

Even the power and the Holy Spirit are not enough to bear fruit. There has to be **“deep conviction”** in the heart of the listener. This can also be translated “much assurance”, and the two translations together give us a good picture - deep inner conviction that the Gospel is truth, and positive assurance that Jesus is Saviour and Lord, and will save us.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷

It appears that Apostle Paul supported himself at Thess. He was a tent maker/leather worker. The Thess. Church accepted the Gospel message against a tough background –

* **“severe suffering.”** “If Christ wore a crown of thorns, why should his followers expect only a crown of roses?” (Martin Luther) The Gospel, and those who follow it, can expect **“affliction.”** “Thlipsis” is the Greek word here, and it means sufferings which come to us because of our faith in Jesus. We are not talking about the uncertainties of life which bring us trouble, but that which comes as a result of being Christians. It looks like things were tough in Thessalonica. They will be tough anywhere where the Gospel is lived out.

* **“joy.”** This is a positive Christian virtue - founded on hope and love – which enables us to overcome. The writer of Hebrews put it like this:-

“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he

endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

* **“given by the Holy Spirit.”** This strength does not come from our own resources, but is given by the Spirit to us, usually when we need it.

And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The 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, ⁹ for 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, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Wow! What a wonderful commendation for any church – a model of church, faith ringing out, rejection of idols, trust in Jesus Christ. The point is that people watch us, as we function as God’s people. We are to be living proof of the power of God to change us and use us. Does this describe your church?

In verse 10, we see, for the first time in this letter, references to “the coming wrath.” The Greek for “wrath” is “orge”, and it means “God’s righteous anger against sin”. It’s not a “revenge” word. God is not taking it out on us, but rejecting the sin which has entered the world and damaged so much of his creation. The early Christians expected the Lord to return during their lifetime. So in Apostle Paul’s early letters, the issue of the Lord’s return featured very highly, as we will see in Chapters 4 and 5. As time went by, and the generation which had seen the Lord died out, the Church had to rethink its position on the Parousia. We will come back to this issue later, but let’s just note it here.

1 Thessalonians 2

¹ You know, brothers and sisters that our visit to you was not without results. ² We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. ³ For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴ On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. ⁵ You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover

up greed—God is our witness. ⁶ We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. ⁷ Instead, we were like young children among you.

The Apostle now turns to a defence of his work - and he has to do this a lot on his travels. He probably had the Jews in mind. (We'll come to this issue later in the chapter.)

“Dared to tell you...in face of strong opposition”. (v2) The Gospel is always opposed. It's a naive Christian that thinks otherwise. The opposition is strong, but we serve the stronger one. (Mark 3:27) So why do we give up so easily? The victory is ours, but the walk has to be walked.

Apostle Paul's opponents accused him of:-

* **Error or impure motives.** He was accused of theological or doctrinal error. The Jews could not accept that the Messiah would suffer, so anyone teaching that was in error. We would point to the Servant Songs in Isaiah, but the Jews would say that we were wrong in interpreting them in Christological terms.

“Impure motives” have a sexual overtone. There was so much sex in pagan religions, and Apostle was accused of wanting sex with people in Thessalonica – an accusation we still see today, and sadly, on occasion, find truth in it.

* **Trickery.** (From Greek word meaning “to catch a fish with bait.”) From what we read of Apostle, his message was quite the opposite - making all things plain. To be honest, he was such a good theologian, and put his case so well, that he didn't need to resort to cunning.

* **Trying to please people.** Apostle Paul may have many faults, but from the evidence of his life, being a man-pleaser was not one of them!

* **Flattery.** Somehow I can't see it!

* **Praise from people.** One of the things we learn quickly if we are in ministry is that people are fickle. Today we are their friend, tomorrow their enemy. Apostle had been in the Lord's service long enough to know this – I can't see him even bothering!

His first line of defence is **“we speak as those approved by God.”** Our ministries and authority are from God, not from man. This means that a level

of purity and honesty must be that set by the Lord - that leaves no room for flattery, trickery etc. Our ministries have to be recognised by the church, but initially they come from the Lord, and that sets the standard.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children,⁸ so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, 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.¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.¹¹ For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children,¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

“Cared for you” (Gk “thalpe”) has the meaning “to warm.”

“But our lives as well”. (Gk “psuche” –“soul.”) The point here is that the Apostle shared his very life, his heart, and his emotions with his church. There was no holding back, no “sensible level of commitment.” He was infatuated with them, and gave his very all - his life’s blood for them. How different from so much of what we see and experience today.

“Preached”. (Gk “karusso”). The word means “proclaim.” There is more to preaching than just preaching. We are ambassadors, proclaiming the King’s message. It is the King’s message. We pass on what the King wants said. How we do it is vital – holy, righteous and blameless. So is the way we treat the believers

* **Encouraging.** (Barnabas - Son of encouragement. Acts 4:36)

* **Comforting.** (Jn. 11:19, 31) where it is speaking of comforting the bereaved.

* **Urging.** There can be no giving up. We have to encourage and urge God’s people to move on.

* **Called to his kingdom and glory.**

Wow! We are called to come under his kingly rule, and be part of all that he is and does, and we are called in to the shekinah glory of God. The glory which shone at Horeb and at the Mount of Transfiguration - we are called to live inside that. This is hard to absorb.

“¹³ And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. ¹⁴ For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews ¹⁵ who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone ¹⁶ in 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 these verses, we are entering into a very old and very difficult theological debate, which hasn’t done the Christian faith any favours.

In their defence, our early forefathers had suffered much from the Jewish nation, facing hostility and persecution at almost every turn. This led to a theological position, outlined above, which stresses:-

*** “they killed Jesus and the prophets.”** In other words, the Jewish people have been consistent in opposing the will of God, so in killing “the Lord Jesus” (notice the full title) they have been consistent.

*** They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.** (Gk “sozo”) Apostle Paul felt powerfully called to reach the Gentiles, (Gk “ethnos” – that’s everyone who isn’t a Jew.) so he sees the Jewish attitude as displeasing to God, and forcing many to destruction, because they could not hear the Gospel.

*** In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.** They pile up sin on sin, and inevitably, this brings God’s wrath (Gk: “orge”) on them.

There is truth here of course. The Jewish Nation has always been wayward, and has driven God to intense frustration. They misunderstood his teaching on the Messiah, (see “The Challenge” material, also available in this page of the website) and ended up opposing and killing the Messiah.

In the theology of the first centuries C.E., there is a developing stream, based on these kinds of verses, which said that the Romans were not to blame for the death of Jesus. It was a crime committed by the Jews. There is a question we have to face here - the Romans were the occupying power, so was this emphasis expedient? Be that as it may, this stream continued to flow, and

probably paid its part in the Crusades, which were very anti-Jewish, as much as anti-Muslim.

In our days, many Christians have a love and compassion for the Jewish people, understanding that spiritually, their destiny is very much tied up with ours, and vice versa. Apostle himself pleads for them in Romans chapters 9-11.

What also has to be remembered is that the purposes of God were that the Messiah would suffer, as he brought in the Kingdom. (Isa 53: 1-6) So were the Jews just the agents of that suffering? So should Apostle have been so hard on them?

If they were agents of suffering they have certainly suffered greatly as a consequence.

I'm not trying to make any case here, just looking at the difficult theological issue which this is, and the unforeseen consequences of it. The Crusades were one of the most violent periods in history, and it's worth nothing that Colonel Gaddafi refers to the attacks on Libya today as attacks from the "Crusaders."

Not all the Bible is easy to understand!

¹⁷ But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. ¹⁸ For we wanted to come to you— certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. ¹⁹ For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

Straight on to another awkward issue - Paul's travelling plans. It seems that these could vary – and this upset the Corinthian Church and probably other churches as well. Apostle was always at pains to point out that he wanted to fulfil all his travelling plans, but his opponents were quick to point out that he didn't always show up – they claimed that he was afraid to face them.

"Satan blocked our way." Apostle recognised the danger of this issue, and points out to the Thess. Church that Satan blocked his path. I can certainly understand what he is saying here, having travelled a great deal myself. Sometimes it does feel as though something is hindering, obstructing and blocking the way. Apparently, some/many didn't see it this way.

But all these churches, and the Christians in them, were very young in the Faith. They had a lot to learn.

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

There is such a glorious collection of words here that it is hard to know where to begin!

* **Hope.** The whole future of the purposes of God is enfolded in this tiny church and others like it. Amazingly, so are we, the churches of today. We have plenty wrong, and it's easy to despair of us, but despite everything we are the "hope" - the means by which the Lord can further his plans and purposes, as we move towards the culmination of history.

* **Joy.** We could spend hours on this word! Christian joy is that certainty in the security of the Lord, so that we can overcome all that is thrown at us, and still retain our strength, our hope and our determination. (Hebrews 12: "For the joy set before him") This joy is in our hearts, but is enshrined and maintained within the church of God. I don't know if I would have chosen the church to fulfil such a thrilling and vital function, but the Lord did – to our eternal thanksgiving and rejoicing.

* **Crown.** (Gk. "Stephanos" - the laurel wreath given to victors.) The Church, incredibly, is the crown of faith, the ultimate victory gift to the King. Hard to imagine isn't it, when we think of our fellowships. We are the hope, the joy, the crown!

"When he comes." As we have already seen, the return of the Lord was expected soon. So in one sense, the Apostle is polishing up the crown, in readiness for it to be offered to the Lord.

The Thessalonian church was not big, was very new, and had been brought into being by great tribulation and suffering. This new baby would perhaps think little of itself, yet Paul gives it a position of unparalleled importance.

For them, so for us. The Church looks weak in these difficult days, but we are the crown. Wow!

1 Thessalonians 3

¹ So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ² We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³ so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. ⁴ In 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. ⁵ For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.

It's worth taking a little time to look at some textual and historical issues here. We often just read the text, but theologians have been hard at work trying to help us get the best possible understanding. Sometimes it's right to look at what they have been dealing with.

* **First**, there is an issue here with "we" in verse 1 and "I" of verse 5. Who are the "we" and who is the "I"? Does it matter? It might do, if some Scribe has edited the text, putting "we" in v.1 where originally it was an "I", wanting to make the work more collegiate. But the Apostle was a very "I" man!

* **Athens**. Paul tells us that he sent Timothy from Athens, whereas Acts knows nothing of this. How come? This raises the whole issue of the purpose of Acts. Acts has been viewed as history, but books in the Bible are never just history - they all have a theological purpose. Perhaps the author of Acts didn't go to Athens, so he writes up Paul's sermon from a source (Paul?) and isn't really interested in where Timothy was sent from. The theological purpose of the Athens sermon was to present a message suitable for Gentiles to hear. Once that was done, the theological purpose is fulfilled. So Timothy goes to Thessalonica from Athens - it doesn't really matter.

* Timothy returns. But how did he know Paul had gone to Corinth? Why didn't he go back to Athens?

In one sense none of this matters, but in another sense it does – we are sending a message to the world that we have done our homework, and are still doing it. We recognise difficult issues in our texts, and do our utmost to get to the bottom of them.

Apostle sends Timothy, who he describes as:-

* **Our brother.** This is a term so easily used today, but for the Apostle, it is sign of a deep commitment to another.

* **Co-worker in God's service.** ("Co-worker" can be translated "Minister". But on balance, "Co-worker" makes more sense.) Timothy was Paul's beloved companion in Christian service of God and man.

* **In spreading the Gospel ("euangelion") of Christ.** ("Christos") Whatever part we play in a team, up front or behind the scenes, we are all involved in the one task – spreading the Gospel, sometimes by preaching and sometimes by being living stones – living examples of what the Gospel is and what it does.

Timothy's job was to "strengthen and encourage." He was to do this because of the persecution which would come - from Gentiles and Jews alike. Good to be reminded that struggle and suffering is part of the deal, not an optional extra to be experienced or not as the case may be.

"The tempter – Satan". Not for the first time, the Apostle appreciates the spiritual battle which rages around his Thess. Church. This is to be expected. If Satan wants to be God (Rev.13) then he must first destroy the church. So the church - us - will bear the brunt of the struggle.

⁶ But 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.

Hooray! Just for once, Paul was not disappointed. (His Corinthian church disappointed him many times.) Timothy has brought "Good News" – it's the same word as that used for the Gospel. Timothy has reported their "faith and love." (Gk: "pistis" and "agape".) Faith in God, and love for him which leads to good works.

There is no indication here that the Thess. Church is angry or annoyed at Paul himself not coming. (Again unlike the Corinthian church). They remember him! This might not strike us immediately, but I can testify to the truth that God's people have short memories, and often forget those who have brought them into being, and care for them. The Thessalonians longed to see him - how this must have brought him comfort.

Since he left them, things had not gone so well for him. Their longing to see him must have warmed his heart. How often have we failed to warm the hearts of those who have served us?

⁷ Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸ For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

“Brothers and sisters” - he has a close relationship with them, and this is beginning to emerge as we move through the text. Because of their faith, he was encouraged. (Gk *pareklisis* – from which we get “*paraklete*”.) Jesus said he would send a “comforter.” Paul sees this comfort in the faith of his young church. All ministry is two way traffic. Leaders and people alike encourage or discourage each other. There is only one family.

“Our distress and affliction”. Just as encouragement is two way traffic, so is suffering. They suffered and struggled - he suffered and struggled.

“For now we really live”. **V8 is a stunner!** He lives because of their faith. What a powerful challenge to any Pastor or leader. Apostle is showing us his inner heart – how a true leader should respond to his people. If they live, we live. Their very life is our passion, our breath, our oxygen.

“How can we thank God enough for you”. **V9 is also a stunning verse.** He is thanking God for them - is this what our Pastors and leaders are saying about us? *We, the people of God have a responsibility to act in such a way that our Pastors can hardly thank God enough for us!* Is that how you feel? Is that a picture of your church? Yet this is what the Apostle wants - to thank God for us, his people. Remembering how much his people made him sad, and how much they disappointed him, this apostolic heart is truly a miracle. This apostolic heart prays for the Thess. Church, and longs to be with them, to:-

“supply what is lacking in their faith.”

“Supply what is lacking.” The Greek words here are “*katartizo*”, which refers to mending the nets, and so becomes “restore and equip,” and “*husterema*” which has the meaning “to be left behind.” The Apostle loves this church, but he is not blind to its needs and weaknesses. It is a young church, and it needs both equipping and pulling up to the right standard for God’s people.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹²May 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.

Chapter 3 concludes with these verses:-

*** Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.** Son and Father are linked powerfully together. The verb for “clear the way” is singular, and it is exciting to see that at this early date, God’s people already accept the Lordship of Jesus, and his oneness with the Father.

The opposition to Apostle Paul’s visit must be great, if he has to call on such a powerful name. This theme has occurred a number of times already. Life, for the Christian worker, is a spiritual battle.

*** ¹May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.**

The Apostle is the model for his young Church. Their love must match his - perhaps it doesn’t yet. (Remember “lacking” and “making up.”) Love for all men is a powerful challenge. Each can love those who belong to his or her group. Even the unbelievers can do this. What marks out the church, or should, is our agape love for all, whatever race or background. In the 21st century, as in the 1st, this remains an uncomfortable challenge. Yet if we do not rise to it, we are no more than a “clanging cymbal”. (1 Cor. 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 have already had hints of the end times thinking of God’s people, and here it is again. The challenge is “what kind of people must we be when that event happens?” Answer - “holy.” And the template for “holy” is God. We have to aspire to that inner purity, that separation from sin and that desire for the Lord’s character. Some challenge, and one we tend to overlook. But if we knew that the Lord would return this week, we would pay more attention to it. The “holy ones” could be angels, or those who have gone before us in faith. Both have Biblical support. Perhaps we might think of both angels and those who have gone before us.

1 Thessalonians 4

¹ As for other matters, brothers and sisters, 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.² For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

Now we are getting practical, as is often the case towards the end of Paul's apostolic letters. The Thess. Church is to continue in the way in which it has been instructed. This lifestyle has two important principles:-

*** In order to please God.** We live in this way because it pleases God, and brings him joy. This should be a good incentive to live the godly path, and to make steady progress in it. Standing still is not an option.

*** In the Lord Jesus.** It's a timely reminder that any Pastor or leader gives instruction to those who are in Christ, including him or herself. We teach by divine commission – but we teach what God wants, not what we consider to be good. We also have to teach ourselves and obey the teaching. The preacher should be the first to be convicted by his message.

With these principles in mind, now we get into the teaching.

³ It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. ⁷ For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸ Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

We could entitle these verses "There is nothing new under the sun!" The issue of sexuality has been a constant struggle for God's people for as long as there have been God's people. Was it any worse for the Thess. Church? Religious prostitution was a big issue. Men could go and sleep with the cult prostitutes, as part of a religious devotion. (!) Many had little concern with fornication - it was almost the default mode for both sexes.

I remember once in Africa I came across the “Noah blessing”, which involved sisters of the church going into a room with a leader, where he would undress them and anoint their whole bodies with special water. Sounds much the same as Temple prostitution doesn’t it? For us, there is an erotic explosion blasting around us all the time, and with the internet, I wonder if things are worse for us than for the Thess. Church.

But the Christian principle, taking its lead from the Lord, is plain - purity and control. We have to go further than just not sleeping with women. Jesus taught us that adultery in the head is as bad as adultery in the bed, (Matt 5:28) so the standard is frighteningly high. None of us find this easy, but rejecting this teaching is very dangerous - it is rejecting God.

We all know that this is the standard, and in our time, we need to hold to this line more and more. But for me personally, the principle is not the issue - it’s holding to it in what has become a pornographic society, and I suspect I am not alone. Apostle isn’t saying it is going to be easy, but he is saying that this is how it has to be. I think he would encourage us to make steady progress in this issue.

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

In these verses Apostle uses two Greek words for love – “Philadelphia” which means brotherly love, (“the love you have for one another”) and “agape” which is a reflection of that deep committed love God has for us. (“taught by God you love each other.”) We have to “agape” all creation, including our fellow believers, but there should also be a “brotherliness” (“sisterliness” - there is no gender issue here) towards those who are part of our fellowship.

This is a good challenge, and gives content to “brothers and sisters.” Both agape and Philadelphia are works of the Spirit, but the joy of Philadelphia is that we see how it can transform a Church into a family. How do we manage when there are people in our fellowships we cannot get on with? Apostle would say that this is all part of the challenge, part of our steady growth into faith. (“Do so more and more.”)

We have to stick at it, and not give up trying to be brothers and sisters. It's this desire to overcome that which divides us which makes our fellowships so satisfying.

And to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life:

This is an expression full of challenge. The Greek reads "strive eagerly to be quiet!" The Greek word is "philotimeomai", and it has two definitions. In classic Greek it means "to be ambitious" but in later Greek it came to mean "to seek restlessly", and gives us the meaning of a whole hearted and energetic pursuit of an object. J.B. Philips translates it as "make it your ambition to have no ambition!" Our translation might read "seek restlessly to be still."

Either way, the Apostle is stressing the need for us to take the lowly place, the servant position which was that of Jesus. How this grates with our modern world, and even our modern church. Service is at a very low ebb, and so many want to achieve, to be seen to be achieving, and to receive the praise of men. (Apostle deals with this at the beginning of his letter.) But it is the servant position we should seek, and this will allow the Lord to open every door to us. We should underline that twice! Accepting the servant position can release the Lord to open every door. We can be the greatest in the land, or in the world, and will be untouched by the destruction of self, of ambition, of success.

¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For 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. ¹⁷ After 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. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

These verses have been coming for some time. The first Christians expected the Lord to return very soon - certainly within their lifetimes. This generated a number of problems. First, God's people became lazy. After all, why bother to pay the mortgage if the Lord is going to return tomorrow? Second, as the return didn't happen, some of God's people died.

What would happen to them? Had they missed the boat? Finally, how would God's people know that the Lord had returned? What would happen?

Apostle Paul wants to put some good theology around the Parousia of the Lord - and this is probably our earliest teaching on this issue.

1. Believers who had died.

“God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.”

Paul's teaching is simple - because Jesus rose, we also will rise. We, in the 21st century don't feel the impact of the problem, so the teaching doesn't strike us as that big a deal. We also have other teachings, both by Paul and by other N.T. writers, to encourage us. Never the less, it was an issue, and Paul deals with it, as all good Pastors should.

2. Who goes first?

“According to the Lord's word..” But which word of the Lord? We don't know. Matthew 24:31 might be a help. Either way, there seems to be a clear process involved in the Parousia, which involves those who have gone before us, as well as those who are living at the time.

3. What will happen?

“The Lord himself will come down..”

J.B.Philips translates these verses in a very compelling way: - “One word of command, one shout from the Archangel, one blast from the trumpet of God, and God in person will come down from heaven!” We naturally want to examine all the details, but the Parousia is an event - an unmissable and exciting move of God. Here in 1 Thess. we have one of the clearest pictures of the events:-

* **The Lord himself:** The end of the age is ushered in by none other than the Lord himself.

* **The loud command:** The “shout” (Gk “Keleusma”) is the shout given by the Charioteer, or by the ship's master to his men. It has a powerful note of authority.

* **The voice of the archangel:** The Greek reads “voice of an archangel.” If it were Michael, the only archangel named in the N.T., it should have been “the archangel.”

***trumpet call of God** The trumpet call is familiar in the O.T. (Ex 19:16, Joel 2:1) See also Jesus' teaching in Matt 24:31.

*** Dead in Christ will rise first:** Paul has already taught this.

***Caught up in the air:** "Caught up" (Gk "harpagesometha") means the event will be forceful and sudden. We will meet the Lord "in the air" along with those who have gone before us. It will be a great reunion as well as a great triumph.

*** Be with the Lord forever.** At last the climax, to which this whole passage has been building – we will be with the Lord forever. Other N.T. passages expand on this, but frankly, why worry? We are with the Lord. Job done. Alleluia!

Why has Apostle Paul taught this – so that we can encourage one another. (Gk: "Parakaleo")

1 Thessalonians 5

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

Apostle is continuing his explanation of the Parousia:-

4. When will it come?

Two words for time here – "chronos" and "kairos" - "times and dates." So with regard to the Parousia, there is the "chronos" - the time and place, and the "kairos" - that place in God's unique scheme of things.

We also find an O.T. concept – "day of the Lord." (See Amos 5:20 and many other references in Amos.) Amos saw the day of the Lord as a time of judgment on Israel's enemies, as well as on Israel. In the N.T., while the idea of judgment on our enemies lingers, the day is seen as a day for individual judgment. ("So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God." Rom 14:12.) Jesus is involved in this judgement. ("Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Phil 1:6)

We have had countless predictions of the end of time, and even recently a man in the U.S.A. predicted that all would end in 2011. The Lord makes it clear:-

“It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:7-8)

Apostle Paul would agree with this. Father knows the time, so let's get on with our work. The Parousia will come “like a thief in the night” – suddenly. We should not be unprepared - Matthew 24 makes it clear what the signs of the coming Parousia will be, and we need to be ready. Ready and working at our task, full of the Holy Spirit and power, not lazy, resigned and leaving God's work to rot on the vine.

But we need not be afraid. The Parousia will be a joy for us – the first generation to escape death, the first to see the Lord in his full glory, the first to enter the New Jerusalem – wow! That's good news, and should inspire us to get on with the Lord's work!

For those who do not trust Jesus. **“Destruction”** - the sense of utter ruin. Sometimes people accuse God of being harsh and unloving. “If he truly loved” they say, “we would all go to heaven.” This is typical loose thinking by so many – sometimes even those who are Christians. How often have we heard “My God would never bring destruction on people.” God loves with such a deep love, that he leaves us free to reject him, and does not force obedience and service. This very freedom has a consequence - those who reject it will come to ruin. If God doesn't leave us free to reject him, then he has not allowed us to be the free human spirits which he created in the first place. If we have a truly loving God, then we must also have ruination of those who reject. Anything else is morally, philosophically and theologically a lie.

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

God's people are children of the light. This is a strong biblical theme, stretching back through Jesus to the pillar of fire in Exodus. It finds its most powerful expression in John 8:12 – “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

The light which was Jesus is in us. It is God given. God's children always have the light, however great the darkness, because to be a Christian is to have the light of Christ in us. We will never belong to the darkness, whoever much that darkness presses in to overwhelm us – "the light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5) So there is no need to be afraid of the Parousia - it will just be a manifestation of the light we already have in us.

It's good to see how the Apostle encourages both with practical advice and theological support. Theology gets a bad name, being considered by many as dusty and dry. Yet here it is that same theology which gives us insight into how we are in the light, and gives us encouragement in the face of the Parousia.

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

Here we are faced for the first time with the armour a Christian needs, as he or she stands against the darkness, and awaits the coming of the light. (Perhaps the idea, which Apostle liked, goes back ultimately to Isaiah 59:17)

*** Faith and love as a breastplate. (Gk: "pistis" and "agape".)** In the N.T. "faith" is best seen as "faith in someone." Putting our trust in Jesus and in his unbreakable love for us - his covenant love –is our breastplate. The Roman breastplate protected the soldier against thrusts under his shield by a sword or spear. With the confidence that this protection was in place, he fought with conviction.

*** The hope of salvation as a helmet. ("Salvation" – "sozo")** The Roman soldier's helmet developed over the centuries. It protected his head, neck, cheekbones and nose. But it also enabled him to see clearly. This is our salvation – that total protection through the blood of the cross, which gives us confidence and courage.

Not for the first time, the Apostle combines faith, hope and love - a very powerful trilogy. (1 Cor. 13:13)

We have moved on from teaching on the Parousia, to teaching which gives us confidence. Spiritual confidence is vital in all our struggles.

The Apostle tells us that as children of the light, we have nothing to fear from the Parousia, and as children of the Kingdom, we have nothing to fear from the darkness. The Lord appointed us for salvation, and guaranteed it by his blood. Equipped with this confidence, let us encourage each other, and get on with our task.

¹² Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

Now the pastoral heart of the Apostle is coming to the front of his teaching. This is all very practical stuff, and typical of a genuine Pauline letter, which swings from theology to practicality and back again in the space of just a few verses. From the sublime heights of the Parousia, now he commands them to respect their leaders, who work hard amongst them, who have to care and admonish.

*** To acknowledge those who work hard among you.** In this one verse Apostle Paul sets out the life of Pastors, and what they can expect from the sheep. Pastors have to love and discipline. We are usually loved for the first and hated for the second!

If a leader can't handle this, he or she should not lead.

But the Apostle puts the responsibility where it belongs - on the members of the church. They are not to be worldly - loving one minute and rejecting the next. God's people have to accept that their leaders have a huge responsibility to care and to admonish, and love them for both.

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

*** "Rejoice always."** The Apostle had suffered much for the Faith, yet he encourages the Thessalonians to "rejoice continually." This is one of the gifts which Christianity brings to a hurt world - the ability to hold on to the certainty of the agape of God, and rejoice in that relationship, whatever the circumstances.

It's not easy to behave in this way. It's much easier to give way to gloom or despair. The challenge in times of difficulty is to sink deeper into God's love for us, and this transforms our sufferings, redeems them, and makes it possible for others to see Jesus in us through them. Quite a challenge!

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil.

*** Do not quench the Spirit.**

“Quench” is the word used for putting out fire, and is very appropriate for quenching the Spirit, who came in tongues of fire at Pentecost. Were the Thessalonians doing this? To look at a bit of grammar, the “not” in this phrase is a present imperative, which suggests that quenching was going on already. In Ephesians 4:30, there is a similar injunction – “Do not grieve the Spirit of God.”

It may be that the Thess.church was having difficulty with the gift of tongues, and indeed the general use of gifts – the Corinthian church certainly had this problem. The Apostle's advice is simple – be careful that in exercising control over the gifts of the Spirit, we don't destroy those gifts. The Holy Spirit is a gently burning flame, easily blown out, and the gifts He gives are equally sensitive, and have to be carefully handled, or they will be extinguished.

Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all;

Why does the Apostle single out this gift? We don't know. Perhaps there were prophetic statements about the Parousia which were unrealistic or unbiblical? This is really guesswork. What is most important is that he values prophecy as one of the gifts of the Spirit.

This is a gift which we are rediscovering in the West - Africa never lost it! It is another way by which God can guide his people. It has to be biblically based, and under the covering of the church. If these criteria are fulfilled, the Apostle encourages the use of this gift, with the vital corollary that we test it! The writer of 1 John backs this up:- “Test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” (1 John 4:1)

The Church in the West has tended to go one of two ways - either every prophecy is from God or no prophecies are from God. Apostle encourages the middle way - let them come and test them. Then we hold on to the good and reject the evil.

²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

The final blessing.

*** Sanctify you.** The Christian faith is a work of grace within us. With our in-built self-centeredness, and our desire to do it our way, we need to be reminded of this again and again. The Gospel is God at work in us. Ultimately we are his creations, not he ours. What a relief! If God left it up to me, I could never reach any standard of decency or sanctification. But he does it within me, as I allow him.

*** Kept blameless.** God will keep us, right up to the Parousia and beyond. We have a security for our destiny - his name on our lives. He will do it, because it is his nature to keep his promises.

²⁵ Brothers and sisters, pray for us. ²⁶ greet all God's people with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I charge you before the lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

The great and mighty Apostle - surly he could manage on his own? With his strong faith and powerful theology, nothing should trouble him? Not at all – this brother in Christ asks others to pray for him, so that he might complete his work.

We have mega stars in the Christian faith. They write, preach, appear on T.V. and are treated as celebrities. Fortunately the man who was probably second in our faith only to Jesus wasn't like that. With a human heart, doubts, troubles and frequently wondering what would happen next - this very ordinary Christian asks for prayer, just as we do.

***I charge you.** This is a hard expression. We might have expected "I ask you." Could it have been that the Church was divided, and some might not have liked to have this letter read out? There are certain tensions in the church, as we have seen, ("Quenching" being one.) but there are tensions in all churches. The Thess. Church has been held up as an example to the entire world, so it could hardly have been divided. Apostle Paul can be very passionate sometimes, and perhaps that's what he is being here. He desperately longs for them to read what he has to say – hence "I charge you."

²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Yes!

1 Thessalonian's is a beautiful letter, written to an exciting young church, which had much to learn, but much to offer. But it's not the Thessalonians who star in this letter, but the Apostle himself. With a warm and passionate heart, and a clear grasp of the Gospel in all its dimensions - hope, joy, suffering – he stands as an encouragement to all of us.

I think if he had to sum up his message to the Thessalonian church in one sentence it would be: - "All is well eternally. Don't give up. Keep at the task. God is great."

I can think of many people who would be glad to hear that - me first!