

TOTAL BIBLE  
LEARNING®

# Disciples'

*Bible Study Series*



ADULT **STUDENT BOOK**

ADULT **STUDENT BOOK**

MAR • APR • MAY

STUDIES IN

*I, II Thessalonians  
& Jude*



# ***I & II Thessalonians, Jude***

---

## **Lessons**

1. <i>Praise for the Thessalonians</i> (I Thessalonians 1) —————	<b>7</b>
2. <i>Memories of Paul's Visit</i> (I Thessalonians 2:1-16) —————	<b>15</b>
3. <i>Hope for Another Visit</i> (I Thessalonians 2:17—3:13) —————	<b>23</b>
4. <i>A Life Pleasing to God</i> (I Thessalonians 4:1-12) —————	<b>31</b>
5. <i>Assurance of Christian Immortality</i> (I Thessalonians 4:13-18) ———	<b>39</b>
6. <i>Life in Anticipation of Christ's Coming</i> (I Thessalonians 5:1-11) ———	<b>47</b>
7. <i>Guidance on Christian Conduct</i> (I Thessalonians 5:12-28) —————	<b>55</b>
8. <i>Persecution and Justice</i> (II Thessalonians 1) —————	<b>63</b>
9. <i>The Truth about the Second Coming</i> (II Thessalonians 2:1-12) —————	<b>71</b>
10. <i>Standing Firm in the Lord</i> (II Thessalonians 2:13—3:5) —————	<b>79</b>
11. <i>Idleness as Irresponsibility</i> (II Thessalonians 3:6-18) —————	<b>87</b>
12. <i>Contending for the Faith</i> (Jude 1-10) —————	<b>97</b>
13. <i>Kept by the Power of God</i> (Jude 11-25) —————	<b>105</b>

---

## **Features**

<i>Introduction to the Letters to the Thessalonians</i> —————	<b>4</b>
<i>How to Use the Study Book</i> —————	<b>6</b>
<i>Introduction to the Letter of Jude</i> —————	<b>95</b>
<i>Time Lines: Three Popular Eschatologies</i> —————	<b>113</b>
<i>Bible Study Schedule</i> —————	<b>114</b>

# ***The Letters to the Thessalonians***

---

**T**he two letters known as First and Second Thessalonians speak to the faith, love, and hope of believers in the context of anticipating Christ's return. But these letters are not primarily speculative. Rather, they reveal strong bonds of concern

and love in God's family. The Thessalonian letters show not only the hope of living eternally with Christ but also the need for godly living in the meantime. We see the pain, hard work, and rejoicing that come with being a follower of Christ.

---

## **Author**

The primary author of both letters to the Thessalonians was the apostle Paul. He may, however, have had some help from Silas and Timothy, two of his missionary helpers. In both letters all three men are listed in the opening salutation. Generally, throughout these letters Paul used the plural "we," including Silas and Timothy with him. But sometimes he used "I," and twice he interjected his name without theirs.

The evidence for Paul's authorship lies not only in the letters themselves but also in the writings of early church leaders. Several Christian writers in the years following Paul's death cited him as the author of the Thessalonian letters. By the second century A.D., the letters were universally accepted as the apostle's own.

---

## **Date and Place of Writing**

By matching up known historical facts and clues within the letters, many Bible scholars have concluded that Paul wrote the letters a few months apart in A.D. 50 or 51. When he wrote I Thessalonians, several

months had passed since he had seen the new believers in Thessalonica [Thess-uh-luh-NEYE-kuh]. At the time he was living and ministering in Corinth.

---

## Recipients of the Letters

During his second missionary journey, Paul and his companions gradually worked their way down the eastern coast of what is now Greece. First, they did evangelistic work in Philippi. Then the party moved on to Thessalonica, a prosperous commercial center and the capital of one of the four divisions of Macedonia (Acts 17:1-9).

Thessalonica had an active Jewish community, giving Paul his first occasions for ministry in the city. He preached for three sabbaths in the local synagogue. Characteristically, he told the Thessalonian Jews that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was their promised Messiah. Some Jews believed, but a larger number of “God-fearing Greeks”—Gentiles who worshiped in the synagogue—became Christians (vs. 4). Also, some prominent women of the city joined the church.

Eventually, some of the unbelieving Jews raised a ruckus, forcing Paul to leave Thessalonica. After visits to Berea and Athens, he went on to Corinth, where he stayed for about a year and a half.

Meanwhile, the new believers in Thessalonica continued to be harassed by unbelieving Jews. These Jewish troublemakers created doubt about Paul’s authority and integrity, pointing to his sudden departure and long absence. His message was a delusion, they said, and they insinuated that he was only in the ministry for the money.

Compounding these conditions, serious questions arose among the believers about the events of the end times. Also, some Thessalonians were not living on a consistently high moral plane. All in all, it was a persecuted, somewhat shaky church in Thessalonica to which Paul wrote these letters.

---

## Occasion and Purpose for Writing

Paul wrote I Thessalonians after Timothy brought back the report of his visit to Thessalonica. Paul himself had tried to go back, but could not make it. Knowing how much the infant church needed help, he dispatched Timothy from Athens. The news Timothy brought back to him was both heartening and disheartening.

Paul began his first letter by praising the Thessalonians for their

steadfastness under persecution. Then he began to deal with some of the problems Timothy had reported. He dealt with wrongdoing among the believers, such as sexual immorality and idleness. He calmed their fears about blessings for their dead loved ones in the end times. He told them that the day of the Lord would come suddenly with wrath for unbelievers but not for believers.

Some months after Paul wrote I



Thessalonians, a report (falsely supposed to be from Paul) circulated among the Thessalonian believers saying that the day of the Lord had already come. So Paul wrote again. This time he again praised the Thessalonians for their perseverance amid persecution. He also assured them that the day of the Lord had not come and would not come until certain conditions had been met.

Finally, Paul wrote a stiff warning against idleness.

The central doctrinal concern of both letters is the events of the end times. However, it is important to realize that other major doctrines are taught in these two short letters. Although the letters are not doctrinal treatises like Romans and Galatians, I and II Thessalonians include a well-rounded body of important theological truths.

## How to Use the Study Book

---

The study book is meant to be used with a Bible opened beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your Bible and the study book until you

get the meaning of the passage. Also think about your personal answer to each of the Ask Yourself questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

# 1

## Praise for the Thessalonians

### I Thessalonians 1



*A view of the ruins of the ancient Roman forum in Thessalonica (now Salonika, Greece).*

### **a** Greeting and Thanksgiving (1:1-3)

We 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. —I Thessalonians 1:3

The apostle Paul began his letter to the Thessalonians by including the names of his coworkers, Silas and Timothy, along with his own. Those two men had been with Paul

on his second missionary journey, including a stop in Thessalonica. Paul had chosen Silas to be his partner after a dispute with his previous partner, Barnabas (Acts 15:36-40). Paul had recruited the youthful Timothy early on in the journey, at Lystra (16:1-3).

After Paul and Silas had been jailed at Philippi and released, they had gone south to Thessalonica. At the end of three weeks of Paul's preaching, the infant church had been born (17:1-4). But trouble had erupted, and the evangelists had to

be spirited away by night to Berea (vss. 5-10).

The recipients of the letter were converts in the fledgling church of Thessalonica. It was not a perfect church, as we shall see, nor did it hold any property. It did not have a highly trained professional staff. However, the Thessalonian believers possessed sterling resources: as Paul said, they were "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thess. 1:1).

How had the Thessalonians reached that exalted position? By faith. They had been persuaded that the Jesus whom Paul had explained to them is indeed the Messiah (Acts 17:3, 4). They had "welcomed the message" (I Thess. 1:6) and had "turned to God" (vs. 9).

To these richly endowed people, Paul extended a wish of grace and peace (vs. 1). This was Paul's typical salutation. Some scholars think that by using those words he combined the Greek (grace) and Hebrew (peace) greetings commonly used in his day.

Paul immediately launched into praise for the Thessalonians. We can almost feel the urgency with which he wanted to assure them of his gratitude. In his daily prayers he thanked God for them. Did Paul have a personal prayer list? Perhaps so, but his thanksgiving overflowed to encompass the entire body of believers—surely not very many people as we would count church members today.

Paul emphasized the fervency of his prayer by using the words trans-

lated "always" (vs. 2) and "continually" (vs. 3). Beyond that, he wanted his readers to know clearly what his recollection of them was. His was not a vague, general prayer, but a specific one. He praised God for their faith, love, and hope.

These three Christian graces—faith, love, and hope—frequently appear in Paul's letters and other New Testament books. They make up the cornerstone of the Christian life, the essentials of a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. They are not obscure theological doctrines. Paul linked them with the tough kind of life expected of believers.

Paul did not here define faith, love, and hope, as he did in some of his other letters. But there is no doubt about what he meant. Look at what those qualities produced: work, labor, and endurance. Faith is not a nebulous leap in the dark; it produces deeds of kindness, justice, and mercy. It drives us to be Christ-like. Love is not just a warm, emotional feeling. Love impels costly, toilsome effort on behalf of others. Hope is not a groundless desire that things will turn out right. It is certainty in Christ so that we can endure whatever life brings.

These three qualities—faith, love, and hope—are the evidences of a genuine commitment to Jesus Christ.

*Ask Yourself . . . What deeds in my life can I attribute to my faith? to my love? to my hope?*

**b**

## **The Thessalonians' Welcome of the Gospel (1:4-6)**

**You 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.—1 Thessalonians 1:6**

After the thanksgiving, Paul addressed his readers as “brothers [and sisters] loved by God” (vs. 4). Paul and the Thessalonians were all members of one family—the family of faith.

Paul vividly remembered the way the Thessalonian believers had

responded to his preaching, and it was this response that made him confident in calling them “chosen” by God. Many in Thessalonica had heard Paul preach, but only some had believed. Those who believed had affirmed their choosing by their faith.

The Greeks were used to traveling teachers who presented clever philosophies that they could take or leave. But Paul had not brought another academic theory, nor had he given a classroom lecture. Instead, Paul had preached in Thessalonica with “power,” “the Holy Spirit,” and “deep conviction” (vs. 5). His passionate preaching grew out of his own encounter with Christ on the

Damascus road. For him, the Gospel was a life-or-death matter, not an intellectual exercise.

These three hallmarks—power, the Holy Spirit, and deep conviction—are essential to evangelism and preaching if we are to see people converted to Christ. Thorough training for ministers is essential, of course. But if churches are to thrive and grow, they will need to be marked by the Spirit-inspired proclamation and application of God’s truth to people’s needs.

Paul’s preaching and the Spirit’s illumination were backed by his consistently moral life

## **Gospel**

**T**he concept of “gospel” (1 Thess. 1:5) has Roman and Jewish roots. Among Romans, that word was used to describe good news about events in the emperor’s life, such as his enthronement. These events were thought to affect the whole world. Jewish roots of the term are found in Old Testament prophecy books, especially Isaiah. There the announcement of the future time of salvation is called “good news.”

For Paul, the Gospel was the good news about the coming of Christ, which affects everyone. The Gospel is also the pronouncement of the offer of salvation through faith in Christ.

among the Thessalonians. Words can be deceptive if not proved by integrity. Paul reminded his readers that he had lived among them as one of them for their sake. The apostle was not the typical itinerant teacher, who taught for money and lived off the gifts of the people. Paul could confidently say, "Look at my life and see if it matches my teaching." No doubt his life of consistency had been a major factor in building up the faith, love, and hope of the Thessalonians.

Convinced by Paul's words and lifestyle, the Thessalonian believers had become imitators of Paul and of the Lord. All followers of Christ have the lifelong task of trying to become more like the Lord. His life on earth shows us a perfect example of how human beings can live in a way that is pleasing to God. The Thessalonians were fortunate in also having had in their midst a Christian leader whose life was worthy of imitation. For them, the Christian life was totally new—and very different from the way they had lived before. It had helped them to have someone to model their behavior after.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How can I imitate Christ? What Christians can I safely imitate?*

The Thessalonians had welcomed Paul's message despite having to pay a heavy price: severe suffering. The Book of Acts tells us one way in which the Thessalonian believ-

ers suffered (Acts 17:5-9). Some local Jews stirred up a mob, which dragged some of the Christian believers before the city officials. The Christians were soon released, but undoubtedly the attacks did not end at that point.

Opposition did not quench the Thessalonians' faith. In spite of the cost, they welcomed the good news with joy. That is not how things happen naturally. How could they do that? Their joy was "given by the Holy Spirit" (I Thess. 1:6).

Joy is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). One distinctive work of the Spirit is that He enables believers to rejoice in spite of—or even because of—their hardships. This is a significant New Testament theme (John 16:22; Rom. 5:3-5; I Pet. 4:13).

*Ask Yourself . . . Am I capable of rejoicing amid suffering?*



## **The Thessalonians' Witness (1:7, 8a)**

The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.

—I Thessalonians 1:8a

Paul's praise for the Thessalonians builds to a crescendo here (vss. 7, 8a). He used two word pictures to express his admiration: they had become (1) a "model" of the Christian faith, and (2) through them,



the Gospel “rang out” throughout Greece and beyond. (The provinces of Macedonia and Achaia comprised the whole of Greece.)

The word translated “model” here probably means “pattern” rather than “imprint” or “image.” In other words, the church at Thessalonica set the pace for the other churches Paul had established in Greece. Their conduct rightfully deserved to be called a model in at least two ways: (1) the way they had endured suffering with joy, and (2) the way they had spread the Gospel to nearby communities. They witnessed to their faith in Christ by the way they handled persecution and by their open testimonies to the unbelievers around them.

Suffering is not usually seen as the way to model the Christian faith. Rather, we generally look to bright, talented, successful people as our models. However, that is not what Paul had in mind when he thanked God for the Thessalonians. They had stood up to the worst and, instead of succumbing to bitterness and defeat, had rejoiced. Some of us may need to adjust our way of thinking to find true spiritual values in the lives of those who are suffering, rather than

wondering if something is wrong with them.

The Thessalonian believers had such a ringing testimony, like the carillon of a mighty cathedral, that people everywhere heard about them. Their testimony was no doubt aided by the fact that their city stood in a strategic geographic position. Their witness pointed unmistakably to Jesus Christ.

The unbelieving world still observes Christians in times of suffering, wondering if the authenticity



of our faith will shine forth. Unbelievers honestly want to know if our faith will stand the test. In adversity, the integrity of our faith can speak loudly to unbelievers.

At the same time, Christians also have opportunities to witness to their neighbors, friends, and fellow workers in the course of everyday life. Paul did not describe how the church at Thessalonica achieved its reputation, but we can imagine it was because the Thessalonian Christians were so excited that everywhere they went, they talked about Jesus Christ. Such witnessing is simply telling how Jesus Christ has transformed one's life and has made a difference.

*Ask Yourself . . . In what ways could I be a model Christian to others? How clearly does my witness to Jesus Christ ring out in my community?*

## **d** A Reputation for Faith and Hope (1:8b-10)

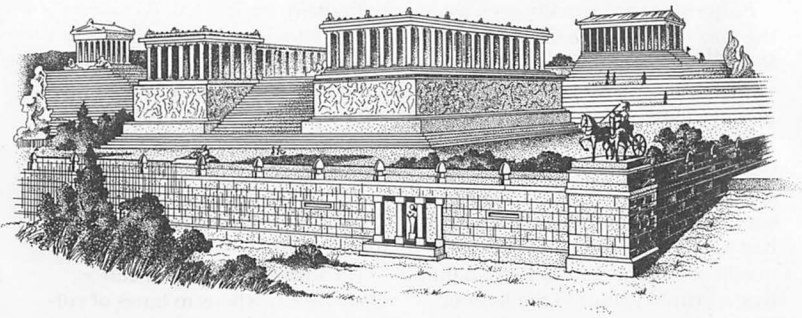
They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

—I Thessalonians 1:9b, 10

The story of the successful mission to Thessalonica was on the lips of Christians everywhere. Since leaving the city, Paul had learned from others what had happened, and he was excited by the reports. He rejoiced in the good news as he wrote to them about it.

Paul reminded the new believers of the crucial point of their evangelization: most of them being Gentiles, they had rejected their traditional

*Here is the great altar of Zeus at Pergamum (center), along with the temples of Athena Polias and Augustus. The Thessalonian Christians had engaged in pagan worship before coming to Christ.*





# Paganism

**I**n Paul's day people throughout the Roman Empire worshiped various deities. Each city had its own favorite god or goddess and set aside festival times, which resembled a Mardi Gras. Astrologers were popular, as they are today, claiming to predict the future according to the stars. Deification of the Roman emperor was being pushed.

Mystery cults (so-called because of their secret rites) flourished. For example, the worship of Mithras, popular with Roman soldiers, took place in a cave around a statue of Mithras killing a bull. New members studied the rites, were baptized, and ate a sacred meal to mark a meal Mithras ate with the sun god before ascending to heaven.

Also popular in Paul's time was the worship of Isis, an Egyptian goddess said to reign over heaven, and Osiris, her husband and brother, whom she had raised from the dead.

Archaeological digs reveal the suspected remains of many sites of pagan worship.



idols for the sake of following Jesus Christ. Such an act is called repentance. Faith and repentance go hand in hand; one cannot claim valid faith if there is not a corresponding change in lifestyle.

True repentance means turning away from one thing to follow another. Intellectually, it means you change your mind and decide to go in the opposite direction. It is a complete reversal in life. The Thessalonians had served idols; now they were serving "the living and true God" (vs. 9). Paul made very clear by this statement that the idols were neither alive nor true. They represented false hopes at best.

In effect, pagans were slaves to their gods; now, as Christians, the Thessalonian believers had in effect become slaves to Jesus Christ. In responding to Paul's Gospel message, they had indicated more than an outward allegiance. They had enlisted to serve the one true God.

Paul often used this imagery of himself. In several of his letters he called himself a servant, or slave, of Jesus Christ as well as an apostle (for example, Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1). The image conveys 100-percent dedication to Christ as Lord of his life. The slave is a person under orders. The slave lives for but one thing: to obey his or her master.

Paul reminded the Thessalonians of the heart of the Gospel: the resurrection of Christ. The Resurrection is the fact that distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. Jesus made many appearances and was seen by many people after He rose from the grave.

The true God is not an image carved of stone; He made himself visible in the person of Jesus Christ, who came from heaven to earth to rescue us from the coming wrath (see I Thess. 1:10). To certify His deity—that He truly came from heaven—Jesus conquered death and rose again.

As it was for Paul, so it is for us today. The central battle for minds and hearts is over whether or not God really came to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. That confession is the turning point.

Because Jesus is God come in the flesh, and because He rose from the dead, those who trust in Him can be assured that He is coming back and that they will be spared God's judgment in the future. "The coming wrath," of course, is going to be exercised by God because of the sin and rebellion against His truth and against His Son that have

characterized human history. Jesus Himself spoke of God's wrath resting on those who do not believe Him (John 3:36).

But that is not the end of the story. Jesus is on a rescue mission. The fact that Paul used the word translated "rescues" (I Thess. 1:10) clearly implies that unbelievers are in mortal danger. Their primary need is to be rescued. People have all kinds of needs—physical, economic, and social—and many church programs are designed to meet them. But priority must be given to rescuing people from the wrath to come.

Succinctly, Paul described both the beginning of Christian faith—turning from idols to God—and its outworking: waiting for the return of Christ. Waiting is not to be confused with idleness, but rather speaks to the essence of the Christian's life direction. As Christians serve (activity), they also wait. This is not a contradiction, as it may seem. The certainty of Christ's coming provides stability and purpose. It also keeps people from wandering into misguided ventures and aspirations.

*Ask Yourself . . . Am I waiting for Christ with the right attitude?*

# 2

## Memories of Paul's Visit

### I Thessalonians 2:1-16

#### **a** Paul's Success and Pure Motives (2:1-6a)

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure.

—I Thessalonians 2:1

After commending the Thessalonian believers for their faith, love, and hope as well as for their warm response to the Gospel, Paul recalled how he had ministered to them. In this regard two things stood out in his mind: his success, which came in spite of opposition (vss. 1, 2), and his pure motives (vss. 3-6a).

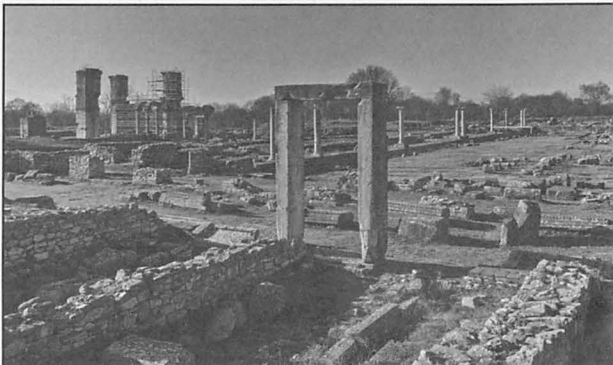
Why did Paul need to remind the Thessalonians that his ministry had not been a failure? Perhaps they were growing insecure or shaky in their faith. As a minority in a pagan city, they no doubt worried about their future

and about the extent of the suffering they were being called to endure.

Paul's preaching had inspired severe opposition—first in Philippi and then in Thessalonica. He had left both cities because of it. Outwardly, it appeared that the enemies of the Gospel had won a victory. But looking back, the apostle declared victory instead. He had made a daring move in bringing the Gospel to Thessalonica in the first place, and he was not about to surrender now. Declaring victory was a tremendous morale booster.

Too often, it seems, Christians take a superficial look around and wonder if Jesus really is Lord. They see so much suffering and hardship.

*The ruins of Philippi. Before coming to Thessalonica, Paul had "suffered and been insulted in Philippi" (I Thess. 2:2).*



Is the Gospel really God's power, or is the enemy of the Gospel winning? We need to be reminded that in spite of opposition and human weakness, the church is not a failure and the Gospel has not been stripped of its life-changing power.

*Ask Yourself . . . What evidence do I have that Christ's cause is winning?*

Paul not only preached in spite of opposition, but also, as he said, he preached the truth openly with no hidden agendas. Why did he raise this issue? No doubt because of what was being said about him by various critics. Paul answered his critics and distanced himself from the typical wandering philosophers who fed on people's offerings and exploited them with delusions and trickery. "I'm not one of them," he boldly declared.

Reading between the lines, we can discover what the charges against Paul were: erroneous teaching, sexual impurity, and trickery (vs. 3); a love of public acclaim (vss. 4, 6a); flattery, hypocrisy, and greed (vs. 5). These were serious accusations that troubled Paul deeply, so he specifically denied them.

Paul defended the accuracy of his preaching, which he called his "appeal" (vs. 3). His teaching centered on Jesus' death and resurrection, which could be verified. Paul stoutly defended his own encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. His preaching was not just another religious theory but was anchored in real events.

"Impure motives" refers to an

accusation that Paul had engaged in sexual immorality. Of course, he had not. In fact, Paul's letters are filled with commands to be sexually pure. One of the major distinctions between Christianity and the pagan religions of the day was that Christianity promoted sexual morality.

Subterfuge, or trickery, was not Paul's method. In fact, he had been "approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel" (vs. 4). Having first been redeemed by an appearance of Jesus Himself, Paul had been appointed to take the Gospel to the world. The idea behind "approved" and "entrusted" is that of passing a series of tests. Paul had measured up, so to speak, to the highest standards imaginable. Therefore, the nature of his calling and the essence of the Gospel precluded the messenger's use of false, ungodly methods.

Because God continued to test him, Paul's motivation was to please God, not his hearers. God's test pierced him to the inner being, his heart. Paul wasn't tested by how many converts he made or by how much money he raised. The integrity of his heart was on the line.

Paul could call up his record of deeds done. He reminded his readers that he had never puffed them up with flattery, nor was he a phony. He had not appeared to be pious and holy for the sake of bilking them out of their money. He was so sure of this that he called God to be his witness.

He surely was not seeking human praise, for if he had been, he would not have preached a message that



stoked the fires of persecution. Gaining the public's esteem was the furthest thing from his mind.

In a word, both his message and his methods passed the test.

Those in public ministries today, as well as Christians generally, need to appreciate how much the world looks for purity and integrity. Unfortunately, religious phonies—many of them inspired by greed—plague the church. That's why the church must insist on a ministry that is above reproach.

*Ask Yourself . . . In what sense has God entrusted me with His Gospel? What is my responsibility?*



## **Paul's Caring and Self-support (2:6b-9)**

**As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.**

—I Thessalonians 2:6b, 7

Paul's thoughts of his time in Thessalonica brought back the most intimate memories, not just of preaching and of opposition, but also of tenderness and of caring. He could have used his apostleship as a means of sponging off the believers, but he had refused to do so and had become, not a doctrinaire teacher, but a tender caregiver.

Paul never backed off from his

divine commission; he strongly defended his apostleship when he had to (vs. 4). But here he saw himself in an entirely different role toward the believers. They needed not only a divine authentication of the message and the messenger but also a loving reminder of where they stood with him.

The gentleness of a mother with her little children evokes the truest image of spiritual leadership and influence (vs. 7). Some scholars go even further and say that Paul really had in mind a nursing mother. Whether or not this is so, the main point is clear: he was not a dictator but a gentle encourager among the Thessalonians.

Paul's affection for his readers was heightened when he recalled how he had given them not only words, but also his very life. He had proved his love by his deeds. Even in a relatively short span of time, their hearts had been melded together as one. The Thessalonians were dear to Paul because he had become vulnerable and transparent before them.

When someone shares his or her life with another person, this sharing includes not merely outward signs of caring, but in addition the kind of care that is costly and often painful. For Paul, this meant "toil and hardship" (vs. 9). His job wore him down; it wasn't a lark.

Why did Paul work so hard? Why didn't he relax in comfort and live off the gifts of church members instead of supporting himself with a trade? He refused to be a burden on

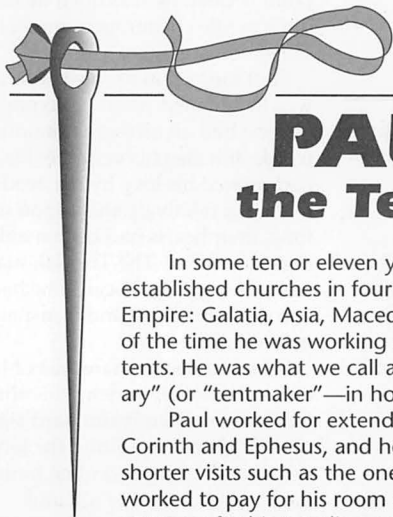
anyone while he preached.

In the Jewish tradition, all boys learned a trade. Not even the rabbi could earn a living by teaching the law. Paul's tentmaking trade enabled him to authenticate the Gospel. He could not be accused of preaching for money.

The church's witness today is strengthened by Christians who find ways to meet other people's needs after putting in a full day or week on the job. This builds wholesome

respect in the community and opens doors to people who suspect that ministry is carried out only by those who get paid for it. A church will be effective in its community to the extent that people who do not make their living by the Gospel present it to others.

*Ask Yourself . . . How much time and effort do I put into ministry beyond the church walls?*



## **PAUL the Tentmaker**

In some ten or eleven years, the apostle Paul established churches in four provinces of the Roman Empire: Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia. Part of the time he was working at a secular job, making tents. He was what we call a "bivocational missionary" (or "tentmaker"—in honor of Paul).

Paul worked for extended periods of time at Corinth and Ephesus, and he also worked during shorter visits such as the one at Thessalonica. Paul worked to pay for his room and board, to help pay expenses for his traveling companions, and to give a positive example to his converts (II Thess. 3:7-9). His work backed up his preaching, so that he might offer the Gospel "free of charge" (I Cor. 9:18). He deliberately refused his right as an apostle to receive payment (I Cor. 9:7-12), so that no one might suspect he was preaching only for money. He "worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone" (I Thess. 2:9).

## **C Paul's Integrity and Encouragement (2:10-12)**

**You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.**  
—1 Thessalonians 2:10

No doubt reflecting again on the attacks his critics were making on his methods and his character, Paul emphasized how godly he had lived while in Thessalonica. It is amazing that he could write so boldly about his behavior, calling it “holy, righteous and blameless” (vs. 10). He reminded his readers that they had observed his conduct, and then he appealed to God as the ultimate witness. God saw not only his outward conduct but also the depths of his motives.

Paul's reference to his holiness probably means the devoutness of his faith and worship. He was a dedicated person, sold out 100 percent to Jesus Christ.

By “righteous,” conceivably he meant his behavior toward other people in the general sense of justice and fair play. He did not curry favors nor expect any. He was impartial and gave the Gospel freely to all.

To be blameless meant to give no cause for reproach. People could not call Paul a phony or hypocrite. He lived what he taught.

In this bold affirmation of his integrity, Paul set a high standard

for the church. He did not claim to be on a spiritual pedestal, but he could look back on his visit in Thessalonica without regrets for any misconduct. Any Christian can aspire to the same standard, knowing that the validity of the Gospel can be attested by such sterling character.

Paul then described how he had worked with the Thessalonians, comparing himself to a father.

Earlier, he had said he had been gentle, like a mother, among them (vs. 7), but he also had assumed a father's role. He had encouraged them to upgrade their lives to first class, to “live lives worthy of God” (vs. 12).

The key was the strong bond of family love that had developed among them. Paul had not acted like a boss, a slave owner, or a political authority. His claim upon the Thessalonians was simply love that went beyond any authority.

Paul showed how responsible love is. Love is not weak-kneed, allowing children to grow up wild. Love means encouraging, comforting, and urging; it means careful instruction and guidance suited to the needs of the children.

What was Paul's purpose as a persistent parent? To see his children in the faith measure up to God's expectations. They could not earn God's favor by their own efforts. Paul did not tell them to clean up their lives so they would be good enough to deserve salvation. That would have been impossible. But having committed themselves to



Christ, they had a new purpose for living.

They no longer served pagan idols; they served the living God. Therefore, by the indwelling Holy Spirit, they could find the inner resources to please God. They could abandon their old immoral ways, because they now had Jesus in their hearts. Paul never lowered the Gospel's standards in the often immoral and godless society of the Roman world. He kept insisting that aiming to please God is the only worthwhile objective in life.

The Thessalonians should strive to please God because He had called them "into his kingdom and glory." Paul gave them another slant on what it meant to turn from idols. They had lived in the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of evil powers. Now they had a new destiny: God's kingdom.

The Thessalonian believers anticipated entering God's kingdom and glory in the future, which is part of the Christian hope. But God's kingdom is in place now, and Christians are called to live as citizens of it (Rev. 1:9).

*Ask Yourself . . . What changes do I need to make so that my life will be worthy of God's investment in me?*

## The Kingdom of GOD

The present aspect of God's kingdom (Col. 1:13) is His ever-present rule, the working out of His loving and wise plan for the world. As such, it is not always apparent and unbelievers do not acknowledge it. Nevertheless, one day God's kingdom will come in all its fullness (Matt. 6:10) and be evident to all (Matt. 25:31-34).

## **d** The Thessalonians' Faith and Persecution (2:13-16)

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.

—1 Thessalonians 2:13

Paul emphasized that the seal of the validity of the Thessalonians' faith was their suffering. Some contemporary appeals directly contradict the New Testament pattern. For example, it's said that

faith is validated by prosperity. That idea was foreign to the apostle Paul, who saw suffering for Christ as a sign of a legitimate response to the Word of God.

Paul returned to his theme and emphasis of chapter 1: how he prayed for his readers and how they had received the Gospel. He rehearsed the pattern of their coming to faith in Christ. They had heard the Gospel from Paul, had received it, and had accepted it as God's authoritative message to them.

In the most astounding claim anyone could make, Paul twice equated his preaching with "the word of God" (vs. 13). The apostolic understanding is clear, showing that Christians do not follow a humanly devised Gospel, but one that originated with God Himself.

Paul knew he had been charged with being just another journeyman preacher, so he went to great lengths to distance himself from the others who came and went through Thessalonica. He announced that he had declared God's message of redemption, not a human scheme. That is the foundation of Christian hope.

But God's message must be received and accepted on its own terms. It is clear from Paul's letter that the Thessalonians had done more than nod in agreement with his preaching. That would have been mere intellectual assent. They had "accepted" it by repenting and turning to Jesus Christ. The word for "accepted" was used to describe

the welcoming of friends into one's home; it has an intensely personal meaning.

When the consent of the heart joins the conviction of the mind, there is conversion, or genuine saving faith. Because the Thessalonians had responded in that way, Paul could say that God's Word was working in them. They had believed his message, and God's powerful Word had been unleashed in their lives. Paul used the present tense ("is at work") to indicate that they could count on God's Word to be effective and meet their needs.

But they were paying a heavy price. They were suffering just as the Christians in Judea, the area around Jerusalem, had suffered.

Paul attributed the persecution in Judea to a Jewish element. In Thessalonica, the opposing Jews had inspired a mob (Acts 17:5). Paul saw their hatred against the Christians as a continuance of a pattern that had killed Jesus and the prophets. This was a theme of Stephen's sermon, for which he was stoned to death (7:51-53).

Jewish hostility toward Christians had spread from Judea to Greece. Paul blamed it on Jewish hatred of Gentiles. Some Jews could not stomach the idea of Gentiles being saved, so naturally anyone who offered them salvation had to be put down. So grievous was their persecution that Paul said it warranted God's wrath.

God's righteous displeasure is against those who not only resist the Gospel themselves but also seek

to prevent others from hearing it and accepting it. Paul graphically described this as "heap[ing] up their sins to the limit" (I Thess. 2:16).

Of course, such texts as this must not be used to fan the flames of anti-Semitism. Paul simply recorded the events of his time as they were

known. The general principle is that whoever—regardless of race, religion, or nationality—refuses the Gospel of Jesus Christ and goes on to persecute those who believe deserves judgment.

Throughout history, the church has been persecuted by both

religious and civil powers. Such persecution is not always physical and it can take place in any context. When (for instance) Christianity is denounced in high school and college classrooms in an effort to turn people away from believing the Gospel, that can be equally as serious as would be physical persecution.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How should I respond to those who ridicule me for my faith or poke fun at Christianity?*

## **Paul as a Persecutor**

*Paul could speak firsthand about Christians suffering in Judea because he had been the instigator of much of it prior to his conversion. He had given assent to the stoning of Stephen, and then had gone on his own personal vendetta against Christians, hounding them from place to place and casting them into prison. While on such a mission to Damascus, he had been struck down by Jesus (Acts 9:1-6).*

# 3

## Hope for Another Visit

### I Thessalonians 2:17—3:13

#### **a** Paul's Longing to See the Thessalonians (2:17-20)

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.

—I Thessalonians 2:17

Paul's tenderness toward his sons and daughters in the faith stands out here. During his continuing service in Athens and at Corinth he had felt bereft of the Thessalonian believers, much like a parent who has lost his children. The word translated "torn away" (vs. 17) referred, literally, to orphaning.

Though Paul was temporarily separated from the Thessalonians in a physical sense, they were not lost to him in his heart. He continued to think of them and care about them. As we have already seen, Paul constantly prayed for them (1:2, 3).

Nevertheless, the physical separation was painful to Paul. His longing to see them again was

intense, and he assured them that he had done his best to return to them. The word translated "made every effort" (2:17) combines the ideas of speed and diligence.

Paul had failed to visit Thessalonica again, after many tries, only because "Satan stopped" him (vs. 18). Perhaps Paul was here speaking of a continuation of the opposition against Christians that had forced him to flee Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-10). Or perhaps he was referring to a health problem (II Cor. 12:7). Or perhaps he meant something else entirely; we simply do not know.

Paul did not credit Satan with causing all his setbacks, but the apostle certainly understood that he was engaged in spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:11). Similarly, Christians today are battling the forces of evil. We should not blame Satan for our own failures. But at the same time, we should recognize that the evil one is at work in the world, hindering Christ's servants whenever he can.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *When did I most clearly sense Satan's opposition?*

Next, Paul gave a reason for the intensity of his longing to see the

Thessalonians: at the coming of Christ, they would be his hope, joy, crown, and glory. In other words, Paul would receive honor for his success in winning converts, including the Thessalonians.

This does not mean that Paul viewed his converts selfishly—merely as trophies on his shelf. In fact, the opposite is true. Paul considered himself and his converts

Paul really cared about them. Paul wanted to erase all doubts about his love for them.

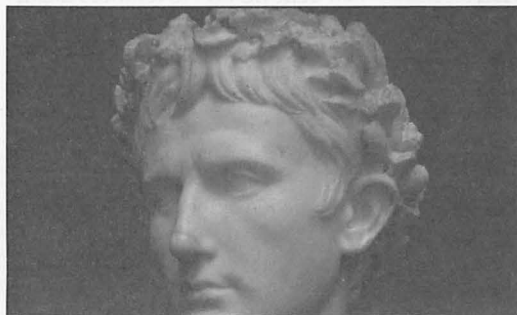
Paul realized that the church is a group of people dedicated to Jesus Christ. The church is more than an organization of charitably minded people. It is a community of people bound together with such love and concern that they place supreme value on each other. The

church is more than a group of people working for noble purposes. Many other groups do the same. The church's distinguishing mark is its emphasis on preparing people for Christ's coming.

The expectation of seeing Christ enables Christ's servants to persist in their work for Him. Every one of Christ's fellow workers will have his or her work judged (I Cor. 3:10-

15). According to Paul, people won to Christ and nurtured in their faith represent work that will stand the test of time and eternity. Therefore, both the joy and the reward of Christian service are to be found in investing our lives and the Gospel in other people.

*Ask Yourself . . . At Christ's coming, will there be any believers as my crown and glory?*



*Paul called the Thessalonian Christians his "crown" (I Thess. 2:19), alluding to the wreath of leaves traditionally bestowed on a victorious athlete. This wreath is a crown of oak leaves on the head of Emperor Augustus.*

to be so closely related to one another that his honor was their honor. Paul wrote to his Corinthian converts, "You can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus" (II Cor. 1:14).

By calling the Thessalonian believers his glory and joy, Paul primarily meant to get across the idea that he put a high value on them. Because of his absence, some of the Thessalonians may have begun to wonder whether



*Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica from Athens. This picture shows some of the ruins of ancient Athens, with modern Athens in the background.*

## **b Timothy's Trip to Thessalonica (3:1-5)**

**We sent Timothy . . . to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.**

—I Thessalonians 3:2, 3a

The central issue for Paul was the faith of the young church at Thessalonica. These new Christians had been battered, and he wasn't there to help. He agonized over their fate while he was in Athens, finally deciding to send Timothy to them. How human the apostle Paul was to suffer through this separation! Twice he wrote that he could "stand it no longer" (vss. 1, 5).

Frustrated as Paul was, there wasn't much he could do. Today we would pick up the telephone or send a fax message, but Paul had no such communications. Not being able to

go to Thessalonica himself, he sent Timothy, even though that meant being left alone in Athens.

Paul gave Timothy his highest commendation. The younger man was Paul's brother in the faith and a fellow worker in spreading the Gospel. Paul had called Timothy to be his companion in ministry (Acts 16:1-3). Early on, Timothy learned what it meant to have a ministry of encouraging and strengthening new churches. Paul felt entirely confident about sending him to Thessalonica.

Timothy had a specific assignment: "to strengthen and encourage you in your faith" (I Thess. 3:2b). The Thessalonians needed strength and courage because of their trials, or persecutions. Paul feared that their faith would be "unsettled" (vs. 3). The translated word may also mean "disturbed" or "beguiled." The Thessalonians might not have known what to make of their sufferings.



Unfortunately, some people make a profession of faith because they think God will reward them materially. Then when hard times set in instead of their hoped-for prosperity, they accuse God of failing them. They say, "We tried Christianity, and it didn't work." Such a response reveals a misunderstanding of the Gospel in the first place.

Of course, the Thessalonian believers knew better, because during his ministry there, Paul had made it clear that persecution was coming. "We kept telling you," Paul reminded them (vs. 4). Suffering is part and parcel of accepting and living by the Gospel. Christians are "destined" for suffering (vs. 3). During his evangelistic preaching, Paul taught that Christians enter God's kingdom "through many hardships" (Acts 14:22).

Nevertheless, Paul was restless about the Thessalonians' reaction to their trials. This paragraph (I Thess. 3:1-5) shows how he was both a mother and father to them (2:7, 11). Parents keenly understand what it's like to be separated from their children, not knowing how they are handling life's hard knocks.

Paul knew that the Thessalonians' faith was at stake. Timothy could stand by them in his absence and teach them not to succumb to "the tempter" (3:5). Paul traced to Satan not only his own isolation but also the danger to the faith of the new converts. His implication is clear: their trials could cause their faith in Christ to weaken.

Such an outcome would have

devastated the apostle. He could see the possibility of his work going for nothing. This was spiritual warfare at a high level. Satan and God were battling over the church at Thessalonica. Paul prayed for the church's victory every day and finally decided to send Timothy to call them to perseverance.

Every Christian and every church at times needs someone to come alongside and offer words of encouragement, strength, and hope. It does no good to pretend that we don't need the help of others. God places us in the local church so that we can be surrounded with spiritual coaches, who can give us wise counsel and tell us that God is faithful.

*Ask Yourself . . . What can I do to strengthen and encourage a fellow Christian in the midst of unsettling trials?*



## **An Encouraging Report (3:6-10)**

**Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.**

**—I Thessalonians 3:6a**

Paul's fears evaporated when Timothy returned to him. Why? Because Timothy brought good news about the Thessalonians' faith and love. They had not caved in to Satan's craftiness; they had not succumbed to trials and persecution.



They were remaining steadfast in their faith. Their faith, of course, was in Jesus Christ; their love was for Paul.

Faith and love were some of the qualities Paul most admired in the church (1:3). Exactly how these qualities had been developed, Paul's letter does not reveal. Timothy had given Paul all the details about his mission, but Paul did not rehearse them in his letter. From some of his experiences in other churches, we can safely assume that the group met faithfully—perhaps every night—in someone's home to pray, to read the Scriptures, and to encourage one another.

Paul did recall with appreciation the church's expression of love for him. They remembered him fondly and shared in his desire that they might see one another again. The word translated "pleasant memories" (3:6) speaks of intense feelings. True love is reciprocal, not a one-way street. Love responds to love.

Mature Christians find ways to express love and appreciation among themselves and with their pastor(s). The church is not a business, nor is the ministry merely a profession. What is involved is a love relationship between people and pastor.

Deep, lasting friendships can be formed in a brief time. Paul had been in Thessalonica for only a few weeks. In today's churches, many people don't try to put down deep roots because they know their jobs will soon require them to move. However, even when Christians are

## TIMOTHY

**T**he son of a Gentile father and a Jewish mother, Timothy grew up in Lystra, a city in central Asia Minor. Early on in his life he received religious instruction from his mother and grandmother, both of whom had come to faith in Christ.

Paul may have met Timothy on his first missionary journey. During his second missionary journey, Paul took Timothy along with him. Paul also had Timothy circumcised, so as to avoid giving offense to Jews they would meet in their travels.

Acts does not say whether Timothy was with Paul and Silas at the founding of the Thessalonian church. He may have been there, or he may have still been at Philippi. Paul later sent Timothy to Thessalonica from Athens to find out how the new church was doing.

In later years Paul and Timothy maintained a close relationship. Many of Paul's New Testament letters were written with Timothy or to him. Indications suggest that Timothy was a younger man who could at times be timid. Yet Timothy's years of service proved that Paul's faith in him was well placed.

together for only a short time, they can build strong friendships. Those ties can survive despite moves.

*Ask Yourself . . . Am I timid about trying to build strong friendships with others in my church?*

Paul had wanted to encourage the Thessalonians in their trials. Now he found himself encouraged by their faith. Paul referred to his own distress, which was both emotional and physical. "Distress" here refers to pressing care; "persecution" refers to crushing trouble (vs. 7).

The record in Acts does not reveal any outright persecution in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). Perhaps Paul wrote generally here of how he had been treated throughout this missionary journey. Or he may have been thinking about his separation from his readers.

Whatever the cause of his trials, Paul felt better when Timothy returned with the word that the Thessalonians were persevering despite difficulties. A great consolation for any Christian worker is to find people standing true to Christ. The Thessalonians had a right relationship with Him and were not standing in their own strength.

Timothy's report encouraged Paul because it pointed him back to God and to His faithfulness and power. That's the true value of mutual encouragement: reminding people that God is still in control and that He hasn't forgotten us. This was a case in which the younger worker, Timothy, was God's instrument of blessing to the older worker, Paul.

Timothy's good news put new heart in the apostle and strengthened him to continue his evangelistic journey.

In I Thessalonians 3:8, Paul used a verb for "standing" that is not the usual one but a late form that has the idea of firmness. "Standing firm" demands endurance. Inspired by hope, Christians find an inner strength that enables us to hold up under persecution and hardship. Endurance is one of the virtues by which Christian character can be measured.

As Paul contemplated his strong bond of love with the church at Thessalonica, he realized it was beyond his capacity to express in words. So he resorted to praise in God's presence, and then pleaded with God around the clock that he might be able to see them again. When he prayed, his thanksgiving was insufficient for the measure of blessing he had received from them.

In addition to praying about his desire to see the Thessalonians again, Paul prayed about his wish to minister God's Word to them. He wanted to supply what was lacking in their faith. The word translated "supply" (vs. 10) is used elsewhere for mending fishing nets, but in the New Testament it usually means to make complete, restore, or equip.

After such effusive praise of his friends, what could Paul think they were lacking? All Christians need to grow and develop. No Christian can say he or she has fully arrived at optimum growth or potential. We all need continual feeding and strengthening of our spiritual fibers.

So Paul was not bashful about his readers' need for further teaching. Later on in this letter and in II Thessalonians he instructed them about specific matters of conduct—areas in which they were lacking. They had sufficient faith to turn to Christ from idolatry—they knew the basics of the Gospel, but they needed to become more Christlike in their conduct. The church needs to be sure that it goes beyond just winning people to Christ and teaches converts to become mature, godly believers.

*Ask Yourself . . . What relationships have I let slip that need to be nurtured?*

---

## **d** Prayer for a Visit, for Love, and for Purity (3:11-13)

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

**—I Thessalonians 3:12**

Three prayers make up this minibenediction. These three verses bring to a close the intensely personal part of this letter. In a way, they form a succinct summary of all Paul wrote to this point.

Foremost on Paul's mind, of course, was the desire he still had to return to Thessalonica. He knew that Satan was blocking his return. Prayer, therefore, was his only

recourse. Only God could clear the way for him to see the Thessalonians again.

Sometimes Christians shy away from such a specific prayer request as Paul's. They think their request is too trivial a matter to be of any concern to God. But since God knows the number of the hairs on our heads and knows when a single sparrow falls, He certainly cares about our journeys and our desires to be with our loved ones. Separation rightfully inspires intense prayer. Of course, prayer is not simply going to God with a shopping list, so to speak. It involves opening our hearts to God, even about intimate details, and seeking His blessing and wisdom.

*Ask Yourself . . . What request(s) for myself would I most like to make in prayer today?*

Paul's second prayer focused on the need for increasing, overflowing love within the Thessalonian fellowship. He did not complain about a lack of love; in fact, he commended their love (I Thess. 1:3; 4:9, 10). But he made it clear that all Christians can grow in love. He wanted to see abounding love, above and beyond what might be expected.

What is distinctively Christian about this love is that it is "for each other and for everyone else" (3:12). It begins with the fellowship of believers, but then extends beyond. Such love springs from those who have truly been transformed by the Gospel; it doesn't just come naturally. In the Christian community, our

## Holy Ones

**T**he apostle looked to Christ's coming "with all his holy ones" (I Thess. 3:13). Bible scholars see this as a reference either to angels or to Christians who have died and gone to heaven; or to both. Angels often are in view in other passages related to Christ's coming (for example, Matt. 13:41; 25:31; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; II Thess. 1:7). But the term translated "holy ones" almost always refers to people, and believers will be associated with Christ at His coming (I Cor. 6:2; I Thess. 4:14).

love should explode into the surrounding territory. When that happens, people are drawn to Christ, because in the world at large selfishness reigns, not love.

Paul's third request looks to the future. He wanted to see the church "blameless and holy" when Jesus comes (vs. 13). For that to happen, the Christians would need to be strong of heart. This was why he had sent Timothy, to strengthen them (vs. 2).

In Jewish thought, the heart includes our thoughts, our feelings, and our will, not simply our emotions. It stands for the total person—all we think, feel, and do, as well as our motives and

ambitions. Paul recognized that just as God initiated the Gospel of Christ, so He is the source of our hearts' strength. When our hearts are right, we can grow in holiness and will be a pleasure to our Lord when He returns.

Normally, holiness is an

attribute of God alone, not of people. Essentially, as far as Christians are concerned, holiness refers to our being dedicated distinctively to God's use and glory. We enjoy an exalted position before Him, which is why Paul frequently called believers "saints." In effect, when we come to Christ, God calls us to Himself and by that act declares us accepted and blameless in His holiness. Therefore, Paul prayed that the Thessalonians would recognize their exalted stature and demonstrate it in their lives.

*Ask Yourself . . . What request(s) for others would I most like to make in prayer today?*

# 4

## A Life Pleasing to God

### I Thessalonians 4:1-12

#### **a** Sexual Purity (4:1-8)

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him.

—I Thessalonians 4:3-6

Most of Paul's letters follow a two-part pattern: the first part is mainly theological; the second, mainly practical. First Thessalonians basically follows this pattern. The first part of I Thessalonians is as much personal as it is theological. But the second part can certainly be characterized as practical.

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of the practical part of I Thessalonians. Here Paul started giving specific instructions on "how to live in order to please God" (vs. 1). A person's efforts to live rightly can never be enough to earn salvation. But

once we have been saved, our love for God should compel us to do whatever it takes to please Him.

On the strength of his authority as an apostle of Christ, Paul had given the Thessalonians practical instructions when he was with them. And they were, in fact, already living lives that pleased God. But by making an effort, they could do better still. That's why Paul repeated the instructions.

Paul did not just dispense good advice; he commanded a lifestyle. "How to live" (vs. 1) is better understood as "how you must live." The word for "instructed" signifies a military chain of command, in which orders are handed down. This clearly shows that Christian faith is not only believing certain doctrines but also following moral instructions.

*Ask Yourself . . . When I'm making decisions, do I ask, "Will this please God?"*

Of all the apostle Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians, perhaps none is more appropriate for our age than the first one, which concerns sexual purity (vss. 3-8).

The decline in sexual morality has afflicted not only our culture in general but also the Church. We do well, then, to pay attention to Paul's counsel about sexual behavior.

For the Gentile Thessalonians, the idea of restricting sex to marriage was a foreign one. Gentiles in the Roman Empire had liberal ideas about sex. Sexual sins were commonplace; one rarely stopped to think that they might be wrong.

Thus it was hard for Gentile converts to get used to biblically based standards of sexual morality.

However hard sexual purity might have been for the Thessalonians (or might be for us), Paul told them, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified" (vs. 3). The word translated "sanctified" refers to holiness. Christians are to be holy—dedicated distinctively to the Lord. That has implications for our sexual practices.

Paul described

three aspects of God's will for our sanctification in regard to sexuality. First, he said, "You should avoid sexual immorality." We know from other passages in the Bible that any sexual involvement outside a lawful marriage between a man and a woman is immoral. Secular society may say that living together before marriage is "wise" or that extramarital affairs can be "healthy,"

but God says we are to avoid engaging in all such sinful sexual behavior. Those things displease Him.

For the second aspect of God's will, Paul said, "Each . . . should learn to control his own body" (vs. 4). Paul set up a contrast between two kinds of self-control: that which the Thessalonian believers were to practice and that which they knew their unbelieving neighbors were practicing.

## **Sanctification**

**A**t the moment of salvation, Christians are made holy in a legal sense; we are declared righteous in God's eyes. That event is called justification. Then throughout our lives, the Holy Spirit works to bring our moral condition into conformity with our legal status; He helps to make us actually holy. This process is called sanctification.

Sanctification is a work of God (1 Thess. 5:23). But the Bible contains many exhortations for believers to do their part in becoming more holy (Phil. 2:12, 13).



The believers' self-control was to be "holy and honorable." The others, not knowing God, controlled their bodies by indulging their "passionate lust" (vs. 5).

Our sexuality was given to us by God and is therefore normal. But the evil one is always trying to misdirect our sexual drives into unacceptable outlets. By maintaining vigilance over our thoughts and actions, however, we can with God's help do what is righteous and acceptable to Him. That is, we can reserve sexual activity for marriage.

The final aspect of God's will for our sanctification is that "no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him" (vs. 6). Here Paul probably had in mind the cases of premarital sex and adultery. In the case of premarital sex, a future spouse is defrauded of the right to receive his or her marriage partner as a virgin. In the case of adultery, the spouse is defrauded of exclusive sexual rights to his or her marriage partner.

*Ask Yourself . . . How consistently am I avoiding sexual immorality, controlling my own body, and refraining from defrauding another?*

Paul may have been concerned that his instructions on sexual matters would not be received positively in Thessalonica. Perhaps those instructions would even be dismissed out of hand for being too strict. That concern would explain why he attached warnings to the instructions.

Some months previously, when

Paul had been in Thessalonica, he had informed the Thessalonian believers that God punishes sexual sins. Now he repeated that warning by letter.

Christians need to keep in mind, however, that sexual sins are not unforgivable. Violating God's standards for sexuality brings serious consequences, but anyone can come to Christ in repentance and find His forgiveness. For this reason the church must consistently hold out the hope of both forgiveness and acceptance, as well as the possibility of living a new and better life.

The Thessalonians might have safely disregarded Paul's words if he were speaking on his own behalf. But Paul was giving the Thessalonians not his own instructions but God's. Consequently, a rejection of Paul's words about sexuality amounted to a rejection of God. This was serious business! The Thessalonians had better think long and hard before they went their own way in sexual matters.

What would make it all the more wrong for the Thessalonians to reject God was that He had given them the Holy Spirit. When those in whom the Holy Spirit lives behave in an unholy way, they go against His nature and grieve Him. The Holy Spirit desires to dwell in holy people.

*Ask Yourself . . . What changes do I need to make to assure that my life is more acceptable to God in the area of sexuality?*



## WORDS FOR . . .

The ancient Greek language had several words for "love," two of which are found in the New Testament. The most common word for "love" in the New Testament is *agape* [ah-GAH-pay], referring to a love based on admiration and esteem. *Philia* [fih-LEE-ah], meaning a love prompted by appreciation and affection, occurs only once in the New Testament as a noun.

The phrase "brotherly love" in I Thessalonians 4:9 translates *philadelphia*, a word partly based on the root of *philia*. In non-biblical Greek manuscripts, *philadelphia* is almost always used of the love among the children in a family. In the New Testament, the word always refers to the love of Christians for one another.



### Brotherly Love (4:9, 10)

You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.

—I Thessalonians 4:9b, 10

Turning from the issue of sexual purity, Paul addressed the need for brotherly love. Paul could commend the Thessalonian believers for already treating their fellow Christians as their brothers and sisters. But he encouraged them to love still more.

The church in Thessalonica, like the other churches Paul had started in Macedonia, was probably less than a year old at this time. Some of the Thessalonian believers were Jews; others were Gentiles (Acts 17:1-4). Some of the Christians may not have been acquainted with the others for long. There were social and cultural differences to overcome. A mortar was needed to unite the individual believers, and that mortar was brotherly love.

Paul declared that on this occasion he did not have to go into detail about brotherly love. Why? Because God had already taught them to love and because they were in fact loving the Christian brothers and sisters in their area. They had already gotten the message.

Possibly Paul had taught the Thessalonians about brotherly love while he was with them. But in this letter Paul did not claim to have done so. Their real teacher of brotherly love, he said, was God.

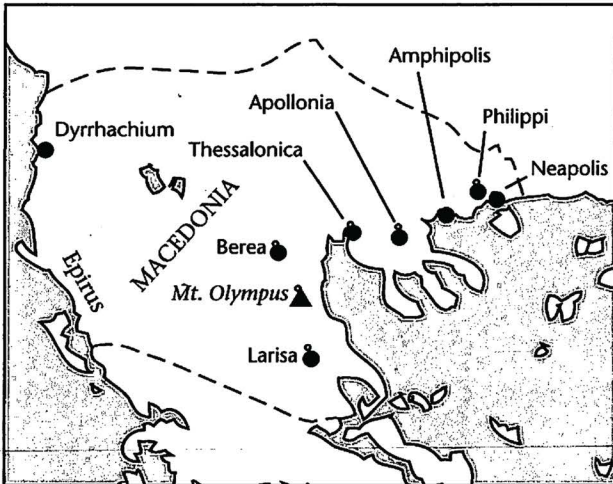
People don't begin to show brotherly love because of something they have heard or read. They don't have brotherly love because they observe others who have it. Rather, those who begin to exhibit true brotherly love do so because the Spirit of God is living within them, teaching them and motivating them to show such love.

Having been taught brotherly love by God, the Thessalonians were showing that love to one another. Moreover, they did not have brotherly love just for those

in their particular fellowship. They had brotherly love for Christians in surrounding areas as well.

At the time that Paul wrote I Thessalonians, the only churches in Macedonia may have been the ones he and his companions had just started. Apart from the church in Thessalonica, Paul had begun churches in Philippi and Berea. However, the Gospel may have been swiftly penetrating other parts of the province, which was less than 300 miles wide and long.

Brotherly love, in fact, should extend to wherever Christians are found. It may be easier for us to love the Christian brothers and sisters with whom we worship each week. But our love must take in believers who live far away from us and may



seem different from us. Christ's worldwide church is a vast network of local congregations whose links must be maintained through brotherly love.

Despite the fact that the Thessalonians were already loving their fellow Christians of Macedonia, Paul boldly urged them to "do so more and more" (vs. 10). The Thessalonians were still young as Christians. Their infant steps of love were promising, but they needed to learn to run.

Paul may have had in mind, partly, material expressions of love. Perhaps he wanted the Thessalonians to share with poorer Christians some of the good things with which God had blessed them. Since financial and material needs in the church are always more than any one person can meet, we always have an incentive to express our love tangibly in increasing amounts, whenever possible.

When it comes to love, there is always room for improvement. Perhaps someone we know has lost his job; we can just tell him we are sorry or we can try to give him some financial help, as we are able. Perhaps someone we know is feeling depressed; we can merely pray for her or we can pray *and* try to encourage her. We all can strive to love more and more.

*Ask Yourself . . . In the last year, have I loved my brothers and sisters in Christ more and more or less and less? How have I expressed that brotherly love?*



## **Personal Habits (4:11, 12)**

**Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you.**

**—I Thessalonians 4:11**

Having urged the Thessalonians on to greater displays of love, Paul gave three more directives about behavior. The Thessalonians were to lead quiet lives, mind their own business, and work with their hands. Probably these were three areas in which some Thessalonians were deficient.

In Paul's first directive, the verb translated "make" indicates a wholehearted pursuit of an objective (vs. 11). The result is a paradox, something like "Work energetically to be still." J. B. Phillips translated the phrase as "Make it your ambition to have no ambition!"

The first directive ("lead a quiet life"), when taken with the second ("mind your own business"), suggests that some of the Thessalonians were minding other people's business. They were meddling in the affairs of others, stirring up trouble, or gossiping around town. Such behavior—unfortunately, still known among Christians—is wrong and reflects badly on Christ and Christ's church.

*Ask Yourself . . . Am I ever a busy-body?*

If the Thessalonians had kept themselves busy at useful labor, they would not have had time to get in trouble with meddling, troublemaking, or gossiping (compare II Thess. 3:11). Reasoning that way, Paul told the Thessalonians, "Work with your hands" (I Thess. 4:11). They were to be diligent about their jobs and household chores.

Greeks despised manual labor, thinking it fit only for slaves. For Jews, however, manual labor had dignity. In the mind of Paul, a Jew, respect for hard work had a place in the church's tradition.

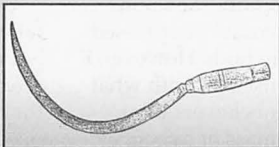
Paul had argued for the value of manual labor while he was with the Thessalonians in person. He had given them the rule "If a man will not work, he shall not eat"

(II Thess. 3:10). A tent-maker by trade, Paul had also modeled a productive lifestyle while he was with them (vss. 3:7-9).

*Ask Yourself . . . Do I shrink from hard work of the mind or body?*

In I Thessalonians Paul offered two reasons why his readers were to

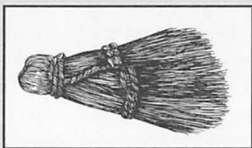
## TOOLS of the TRADES



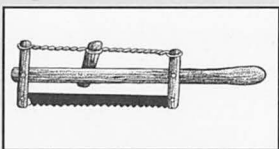
SICKLE



BALANCE



BROOM



SAW

*Paul advised the Thessalonians, "Work with your hands" (I Thess. 4:11). Above are some of the tools used in common occupations in Paul's day.*

work with their hands. First reason: "so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders" (1 Thess. 4:12). Second reason: "so that you will not be dependent on anybody."

Whether we are aware of it or not, non-Christians are watching us to see how we behave. If we have joy and love, and if we live on a high plane of morality, then non-Christians are favorably impressed with the Christian faith. However, if we fail to live consistent with what we teach, then unbelievers think Christianity is a mass of hypocrisy.

Non-Christians in Thessalonica could tell that some of the believers were busybodies and idlers. Thus they could hardly be blamed for concluding that the new religion in town, Christianity, was not so special. *If that's what a Christian is, I don't want to be one!* they might have thought. On the other hand, if the believers would begin working diligently, then others would begin to respect them and might become interested in learning about Christ.

As his second reason for the

Thessalonians to work with their hands, Paul cited the opportunity to be self-supporting. Evidently, some of the Thessalonian believers were living off the charity of others. The idle Christians had become a burden to others and could not know the self-respect that comes from taking care of oneself.

We should do whatever we can to take care of our own needs before going to others for help. Men and women who are diligent in doing all they can to take care of their family's needs deserve our respect. As far as they are able, they are "not . . . dependent on anybody" but God for their material well-being.

At some point, however, everybody needs help and should get it. That's especially true in the Christian Church, where each member is connected with every other member. We're all part of one Body. Consequently, when we really need something, we should ask for it without shame. And if someone asks us for help with a legitimate problem, we should give whatever help we can.



# 5

## Assurance of Christian Immortality

**I Thessalonians 4:13-18**

### **a** Hope for Life after Death (4:13, 14)

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.

—I Thessalonians 4:14

The practical portion of Paul's letter continues as the apostle addressed a special concern the Thessalonians had. Since Paul had been in their midst, one or more of their number had died. This raised some questions, which Timothy evidently had carried to Paul on the Thessalonians' behalf: What happens to Christians who die before Christ's return? Do they miss out on the blessings of that future time?

In this lesson we study Paul's response to the Thessalonians' concern. He assured his readers that believers who have died will in no way fare worse at Christ's second coming than those who survive until that time. Paul went on to give the Thessalonians a fuller understanding of the order of events surrounding

Christ's second coming.

Paul was concerned about both the knowledge and the emotions of his readers when it came to the death of their fellow Christians. "Brothers," he wrote, "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" (vs. 13, emphasis added). "Fall asleep" was a euphemism for "die" that was used by Jews and some non-Jews.

During his short stay in Thessalonica, Paul had taught that Christ will come again. He probably had also taught about the resurrection of the dead. But he evidently had not described how the dead will participate in the events surrounding Christ's second coming.

Paul knew that if he cleared up the Thessalonians' confusion about death, he would in the process reassure them. Believers, Paul said, need not grieve "like the rest of men, who have no hope." The "rest of men" are, of course, unbelievers. The non-Christians among whom the Thessalonian believers lived had no basis to expect anything good for their departed loved ones. They had despair rather than hope for the



dead.

Historians attest to the truth of Paul's words about pagan despair in the face of death. The best philosophers and teachers of the ancient world had no real hope to offer their followers. Literature of the time is filled with pictures of hopelessness at death. Inscriptions on tombs reflect the same dread. Ancient myths describe scenes of the utter darkness of the afterlife.

Today there is a similar vein of despair in popular thinking about death. Because of the teaching that humanity is merely an order of animal life, and because science has not been able to prove any kind of existence beyond death, many people are resigned to the belief that the death of a person is no different from the death of an animal.

Contrary to popular notions, Paul taught that it is possible to have hope in the face of death. Believers have a well-founded belief that the dead in Christ are now safely and happily with the Lord. In this context, then, it is appropriate that Paul compared dying to falling asleep. The comparison suggests that death is not the end of all existence. The raising of the bodies of dead believers is like waking up from sleep.

Having noted Paul's teaching that believers are not without hope when they grieve for the dead, we should also note Paul's implication that believers will grieve. We are naturally saddened by our separation from our loved ones who die in Christ. Jesus wept at the death of His friend



## The Intermediate State

**S**ome interpreters take the biblical comparison of death to sleep almost literally. This view, called soul sleep, holds that the souls of dead people remain in a state of unconsciousness until resurrection.

The majority of conservative interpreters, however, take another view of the intermediate state between earthly life and resurrection life. According to these interpreters, while the body dies (to be raised later), the soul is alive. During the intermediate period, the souls of believers are with the Lord (Luke 23:43; Phil. 1:23), while the souls of unbelievers are in a place of punishment (Luke 16:22, 23).

Lazarus (John 11:35), and we should weep at the death of those who are dear to us. In fact, psychologists believe many Christians would be better off emotionally if they would let themselves grieve, rather than trying to maintain an artificial happiness in the face of emotional trauma and loss.

Perhaps by grieving well and showing faith in the midst of honest sadness, we would be a more powerful witness to those who are without hope.

*Ask Yourself . . . How do I grieve when a Christian loved one dies?*

What is the basis of Christian hope in the face of death? Resurrection. Christians believe that death is not the end of life.

Paul argued here, as he did in I Corinthians 15, that since Christ rose from the dead, believers can be certain that we, too, will be resurrected. And Christ will bring with Him all the believing dead, in their resurrected form, when He returns as He promised (I Thess. 4:14).

Christ's resurrection was no fairy tale. In Paul's day Christians could—and probably did—lead tours to the empty tomb Jesus left behind. Hundreds of people who had seen Christ die or who had seen Him in His resurrected state were still alive and able to tell about it. The powerful fact of Christ's resurrection was causing the faith to spread like wildfire all over the Mediterranean area.

Christ certainly survived death, and the survival of believers beyond

death is equally as certain. The Thessalonians could expect to see their departed loved ones again—and in the company of the Lord.

But Paul had much more to say about Christ's coming.



## **The Resurrection of the Dead (4:15, 16)**

**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. —I Thessalonians 4:16**

In teaching about the events to take place at Christ's second coming, Paul did not offer his own speculations. He wanted his readers to know that this teaching was "according to the Lord's own word" (vs. 15). Paul was repeating Jesus' instruction.

The information in verses 15 through 18 is not part of any existing collection of Jesus' words. Perhaps, therefore, this was one of the Lord's teachings that circulated among the early Christians but never found its way into one of the Gospels. Or maybe Paul received this teaching as a direct revelation from the Lord.

The Thessalonian believers evidently were concerned that their dead loved ones would be at a disadvantage when Christ returned. But that would not be the case. In fact, Paul stated on the authority of

## Paul's Own Expectation of Death

**S**ome Bible commentators have suggested that early on in his career Paul expected to be among those who are still alive at the time of the Lord's coming. They base this view, first of all, on passages in early letters of Paul's where he used the word "we," seeming to include himself with those who will be alive (example: I Thess. 4:15, 17). Furthermore, passages in letters written later in Paul's career seem to indicate that Paul expected to be among those who would die and be resurrected (example: II Cor. 4:14). Some commentators who favor this view suggest that the chief thing that changed Paul's mind was his close brush with death in Asia (1:8-10).

Other commentators believe we cannot know whether Paul expected to survive until Christ's return. They point out that he regularly identified himself with his readers by saying "we." Therefore, nothing can be proved by his use of that pronoun.

Christ that "we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep" (vs. 15). The righteous dead will be the first to join Christ in a resurrection existence.

In verse 15 the word translated "coming" is *parousia* [pah-roo-SEE-uh]. It's interesting to note that what we often call the "Second Coming" was simply called the "coming" by early Christians. Sometimes people still refer to Christ's second coming as the *Parousia*.

Paul went on to describe Christ's return in glory. The New Testament teaches that about 40 days after Christ was resurrected, He ascended to heaven. Furthermore, now He sits at the right hand of the Father waiting until the right time to return in the same way that He left.

The time of Christ's return is known only to the Father. Paul certainly did not try to say when the Lord's coming will happen. But he did say that when the Second Coming happens, three signs will accompany it: (1) "a loud command," (2) "the voice of the archangel," and (3) "the trumpet call of God" (vs. 16). Many Bible commentators believe that the three signs mean the same thing: an announcement.

The word translated "loud command" was used in several ways in Paul's era. In writings that have survived, this word describes the command of a

hunter to his hounds, a driver to his horses, a ship's captain to his crew, and an officer to his troops. The word conveyed both authority and urgency. God's "loud command" will announce Christ's coming and the resurrection of the dead.

The "voice of the archangel" will also be heard at Christ's coming. Angels are immortal, invisible beings who serve God. Presumably, archangels form a special high-level class of angels. The only archangel mentioned by name in the Bible is Michael, but it's unclear whether this refers to Michael or any other particular archangel.

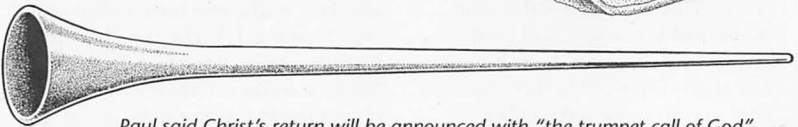
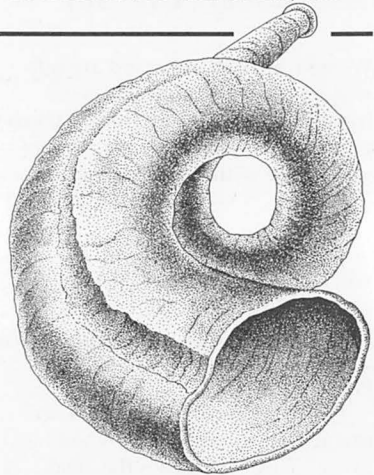
By describing Christ's coming as being accompanied by a "trumpet call," Paul was using a familiar figure out of the Old Testament speaking of God's action (example: Isa. 27:13). The New Testament elsewhere associates a trumpet call with Christ's second coming (Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52).

The loud command, the archangel's voice, and the trumpet call together show that Christ's return will be a dramatic event. And why shouldn't it be? By the time Jesus comes again, it will have been nearly 2,000 years—or maybe more—since He left. During all that time He has

been advancing His kingdom in the hearts of men and women. During all that time His people have been yearning to see His appearance in the sky. When Jesus comes, it will mean the final series of events in God's glorious plan of redemption has begun.

*Ask Yourself . . . How often do I think about the day when Christ will suddenly appear?*

At the time of Christ's coming, "the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess. 4:16). The signs from above will coincide with miracles on the earth as the souls of dead believers are reunited with their bodies, now



*Paul said Christ's return will be announced with "the trumpet call of God" (1 Thess. 4:16). In biblical times, two kinds of trumpets were commonly used, one an animal's horn and the other a metal trumpet.*



in an immortal and glorified form. Verse 17 implies that these resurrected believers will then gather in the air to meet the descending Lord.

By saying that the dead will rise "first" (vs. 16), Paul meant they will rise before the events of verse 17 take place. Dead believers will be resurrected prior to living believers being caught up to meet the Lord in the air. This means that far from missing out on the action at Christ's coming, dead believers will arrive at the party as the first guests.



## **The Rapture of the Living (4:17, 18)**

**We who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with [resurrected believers] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.**

**—1 Thessalonians 4:17**

The resurrection of dead believers will come first. "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" (vs. 17).

The word translated "caught up" can also be translated "snatched away." This verb carries the ideas of irresistible strength and total surprise. The event it describes in this case is often called the "rapture," after a word used in the Latin translation of this verse. (For more on the rapture, see pages 113 and 114.)

The Bible tells us that at least two people, Enoch and Elijah, left earthly life without dying. But the Bible teaches that a time is coming when a whole generation of believers in Christ will be privileged to miss out on death. At the time of Christ's coming, all believers living on the earth will be caught up in the air to meet the Lord.

Although the rapture generation will miss out on death, they will not miss out on receiving glorified bodies. Paul wrote, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (1 Cor. 15:51, 52a). The bodies of raptured people will be instantaneously glorified, so that they will be like the resurrected believers.

The believers who are "caught up" (1 Thess. 4:17) will have a double reunion. They will be reunited with Christ as well as with their loved ones who died. The joy of this gathering is probably beyond our imagination.

According to Paul, the meeting will take place "in the clouds." In Scripture, clouds are often associated with God's special activity (example: Dan. 7:13). When Jesus ascended to heaven, a cloud hid Him from the apostles' sight, and He "will come back in the same way" (Acts 1:11). The clouds will not be the vehicle of the Lord's return, but in some sense they will be recognized as a sign of God's glory and majesty.

In another letter, Paul called Satan

## **Christ Is Coming** **according to I Thessalonians**

- 1. "The Lord himself will come down from heaven" (4:16).**
- 2. "The dead in Christ will rise."**
- 3. "We who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds" (vs. 17).**
- 4. We will "meet the Lord in the air."**
- 5. "We will be with the Lord forever."**

the "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Eph. 2:2). However, Paul also made it clear that demonic power has been broken (Col. 2:15). At Christ's second coming, God will be in complete control. His power and dominion will make "the air" (I Thess. 4:17) the scene of the glorious appearing of His Son with His children. In fact, the verb translated "to meet" was often used of the meeting of dignitaries who exercised power.

The main purpose of the rapture is to meet the Lord. When a dignitary paid a visit to a Greek city in ancient times, leading citizens went out to meet him and to escort him on the final stage of his journey. Jesus was

similarly pictured by Paul as being escorted by His own people, those newly raised from death and those who will have remained alive.

Having met the Lord in a glorified existence, resurrected and raptured Christians will never have to leave Him again. Their eternal destiny will be absolutely assured: "We will be with the Lord forever."

Here is where Paul concluded his discussion of the order of end-time events, for this letter at least. Our curiosity might make us want to know more details, but Paul gave us the most important detail. While Christians debate about eschatology [ess-kaah-TAHL-oh-jee], which is the study of the last things, the most



important thing to know is that we will be with the Lord forever.

In any case, Paul's purpose in describing Christ's second coming was not to satisfy curiosity. His true purpose is continued in verse 18: "Therefore encourage each other with these words." As the Thessalonians thought about the death of their loved ones or the possibility of their own death before Christ's return, they might have become discouraged. To counteract discouragement, they needed to recall that one day Christ will come in glory and gather all His followers to His side forever.

We live in a society where it seems people are increasingly isolated. Everyone is expected to take care of

himself or herself. Loneliness results. Yet the church is a place where the trend can be reversed. When one of our Christian brothers or sisters is feeling down, we can hurry to the person's side with words of comfort and encouragement drawn from God's Word.

A time when people desperately need encouragement is when they are dealing with death. One of the most powerful encouragements in Scripture is the belief that the dead will be raised and glorified. That's why Paul urged, "Encourage each other with these words."

*Ask Yourself . . . How can I encourage someone today?*



# Life in Anticipation of Christ's Coming

**I Thessalonians 5:1-11**

## **a** The Sudden Day of the Lord (5:1-3)

The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

—I Thessalonians 5:2, 3

Like the passage we studied last week, this week's passage deals with the second coming of Christ and related events. Apparently, the Thessalonians had two questions related to that future time. First, they wondered whether Christians who die before Christ's return will miss out on the blessings of that time. Verses 13 through 18 of chapter 4 contain Paul's assurance that not only will the dead in Christ not miss out on blessings but also they will join the Lord in a resurrected existence before Christians alive at the Second Coming will do so.

But the Thessalonians had another question: "When will the day of the Lord occur?" In this week's passage we read Paul's response to

that question. He reminded them of what he had told them before—that the timing of that future day is unknown. He went on to tell them that they ought to keep looking forward to the day of the Lord with confidence.

Since the time Paul had been with the Thessalonians, they had done more thinking on the subject of the day of the Lord. Evidently they were engaging in speculation about the "times and dates" (5:1) of this day. Paul used different Greek words for "times" and "dates," suggesting that they have different meanings. But accurate distinctions between the two words are hard to come by. The first refers to chronological time, while the second seems to mean the appropriate time. In general, we can imagine that the Thessalonians wanted to know when the day of the Lord would be—sooner, later, when?

The apostle gently chided his readers for their useless endeavor. He really should not have had to write to them on this subject, because they knew that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night," that is, suddenly and unexpectedly (vs. 2). Probably Paul had taught them that already. Paul even

## **The DAY of the LORD**

**N**umerous Bible references speak of the “day of the Lord,” also referring to it simply as “the day” or “that day.” This day represents a future time when the Lord will decisively enter history, and its focus is on three of His end-time acts:

- His executing wrath and great tribulation upon the ungodly (Amos 5:18-20; Isa. 2:12-19; 4:1; Jer. 30:7; Matt. 24:29; I Thess. 5:2,3; Rev. 6:15-17);
- His second coming to judge the earth (Joel 2:30-32; Matt. 24:30-31; Luke 17:22-37; II Pet. 3:10; Rev. 16:14-16); and
- His establishment of a new kingdom (Isa. 4:2-6; 12; 19:23-25; Jer. 30:8-9; Matt. 26:29).

Depending upon their eschatological stance (see pp.113-114), many theologians also point out that the context of certain “day of” references suggest they should be distinguished from the “day of the Lord.” For instance, the “day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30) and the “day of Christ” (I Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6) would refer specifically to the rapture (recall I Thess. 4:16-17). Similarly, most understand Peter’s anticipation of the “day of God” in II Peter 3:12 to be looking past the day of the Lord—that is, to the “new heaven and new earth” (of Rev. 21:1).

used the present tense of the verb—“is coming” (not “will come,” as in the NIV)—to emphasize his main point. None of us can know when the day of the Lord will be.

A tendency to speculate about

times and dates for the day of the Lord is all too common in our day. It’s true that Jesus advised His disciples to “keep watch” for His return (Matt. 24:42), but He also warned them that “no one knows about that

day or hour" except the Father (vs. 36). The implication seems to be that we should keep a lively expectation for prophesied future events without believing we know just when they will happen. The day of the Lord will catch people by surprise.

*Ask Yourself . . . Do I ever err on the side of ignoring the day of the Lord or on the side of becoming overly fascinated with it?*

Not only will people be surprised, Paul said, but also they will be surprised at a time when they feel secure—living in a fool's paradise, as it were. They will be talking about peace (I Thess. 5:3) when destruction is just around the corner. The present tense—"are saying"—shows that people will be lulled into false security right up to the time of the day of the Lord. That is why it is foolish to try to set dates. Learned and astute observers of the world scene will be fooled by the day of the Lord.

Paul's comparison between the coming of the day of the Lord and the entrance of a thief in the night (vss. 2, 4) is particularly apt. The victims of a thief at night are asleep in their beds. They are not standing at the door watching, because they think they are safe. All signs around the house speak of security, not burglary.

His other word picture, that of the onset of a pregnant woman's labor pains (vs. 3), also highlights suddenness. The use of childbirth to illustrate spiritual truth is seen both in the prophets and in the teachings

of Jesus (Isa. 13:6-8; Jer. 4:31; Mark 13:8). In rabbinic writings the sufferings preceding the establishment of the messianic age are often called labor pains. Sometimes the point is the intense pain of labor, but here Paul's point is the suddenness of the onset of labor pains.

Surprised by the day of the Lord, the people "will not escape" (I Thess. 5:3). Destruction will come upon them. The history of human life on the earth is filled with more scenes of destruction than any of us care to contemplate. But commentators believe Paul was referring to a future time of unprecedented difficulties, usually called the Great Tribulation period. This passage does not necessarily mean that all people will die during the tribulation, only that the destruction will be very bad and there will be no avoiding it.

## **b**

### **Alertness and Self-control (5:4-8)**

**We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.**

—I Thessalonians 5:5b, 6

Paul returned to his comparison of the thief in the night to make the point that his readers should not be taken by surprise by the day of the Lord. Furthermore, as believers, they should keep alert and be self-

controlled.

The destruction associated with the day of the Lord will come to many as a complete surprise, revealing their sense of security to be hollow. But Paul's readers had no need to be surprised. The difference was one of expectation. Paul's readers were not in the dark about the day of the Lord. They could not predict its timing, but they knew that it was coming and they could expect it. Others did not know about that day and, like a homeowner sleeping while being robbed, would not be expecting it.

Paul developed the light/darkness contrast into a running metaphor (comparison). "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness" (vs. 5). In Jewish speech, to be a "son" of something meant to be characterized by that thing. Moral and spiritual "light" is a distinguishing characteristic of the followers of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

There are two kinds of people, then. On one side are the children of the dark: unbelievers. These people, operating in the darkness of a spiritual night, are sleepers and drunkards (vs. 7). That they are asleep means they are spiritually insensitive and not aware of the coming day of the Lord nor of other spiritual realities. That they get drunk is a representation of their lack of proper self-control.

On the other side are the children of the light: believers. Paul urged his readers to live in the brightness of

spiritual awareness, keeping themselves "alert and self-controlled" (vs. 6).

Paul did not describe exactly what he meant by being alert. Probably he meant that his readers were to keep watch for the coming of the Lord. Similar advice is contained in Matthew 24:36—25:13.

*Ask Yourself . . . Am I alert to the coming day of the Lord?*

Paul had more to say about what it means to be self-controlled. We often think of self-control in negative terms, as the avoidance of sin. But in this context, Paul had in mind self-control's positive virtues. Self-control means "putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (I Thess. 5:8).

Here, obviously, Paul used a second metaphor—that of armor. This metaphor shows that the Christian life involves spiritual conflict, and we need to be ready for it. Since a personal meeting between us and the Lord is coming, perhaps soon, we want to be found living righteously.

The trio of faith, love, and hope has already been mentioned in this letter (1:3). The trio shows up many other times in the New Testament, in letters by Paul as well as other writings.

Faith is the means by which we enter into the Christian life (5:8). But we never run out of the need for faith. Day by day we must trust in God for our care.

*Paul advised his readers to put on "faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (1 Thess. 5:8). Here is a Roman legionnaire in full armor.*

## **The Christian's ARMOR**

**T**he apostle Paul more than once used parts of a Roman legionnaire's armor to symbolize qualities that make up the Christian's spiritual armor, as he did in 1 Thessalonians 5:8. Paul's most complete

description of armor is found in Ephesians 6:10-17, where he mentioned a belt, breastplate, footgear, shield, helmet, and sword. He also used armor symbolism in Romans 13:12 and II Corinthians 6:7 and 10:4. Paul may have been influenced by the prophet Isaiah, who spoke of the

Lord's breastplate of righteousness and helmet of salvation (Isa. 59:17).

The recurring symbolism of armor in Paul's writing is vivid evidence that the Christian life involves spiritual conflict.





Love characterizes the relationship between a Christian and God. But in this context, Paul probably was thinking of the love between Christians and others, and especially among Christians. This is a virtue we need to work on constantly.

The hope of salvation, last in the list of three, is especially appropriate in a letter that focuses so much on events of the end times. The day of the Lord is coming with wrath for sinners, but the Thessalonians had no need to worry. They had good grounds for hope that their salvation would reach its completion.

*Ask Yourself . . . Am I exhibiting self-control by living a life of faith, love, and hope?*

## **C Confidence of Salvation (5:9-11)**

**God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. —I Thessalonians 5:9-11**

Paul's view of the future was rooted in his assurance of salvation through faith in Christ, who died and rose again for sinners. Paul did not add any new truth to what he had previously preached, but he pointed to the Cross to clear up his

readers' uncertainty and confusion about the death of their loved ones and the day of the Lord.

The day of the Lord will indeed bring destruction (vs. 3), but this wrath is not meant for Christ's followers (vs. 9). Christians, of course, along with everybody else, deserve God's wrath because of our sin. But instead of receiving judgment for our deeds, we will "receive salvation" because of what Jesus has done for us.

The Thessalonians' salvation, or eternal life, began the moment they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1:9). It continued as they waited "for his Son from heaven" (vs. 10). It will be consummated when Jesus returns. In the interim, they were to live with strong faith, claiming their salvation in the present as well as in the future.

"The righteous will live by faith," Paul declared in another letter, quoting Habakkuk 2:4 (Rom. 1:17). In the midst of persecution and fear, the Thessalonians needed to claim their faith in what Jesus had accomplished for them on the cross. Theirs was not a shaky faith but a secure one because it rested in the person of Jesus Christ.

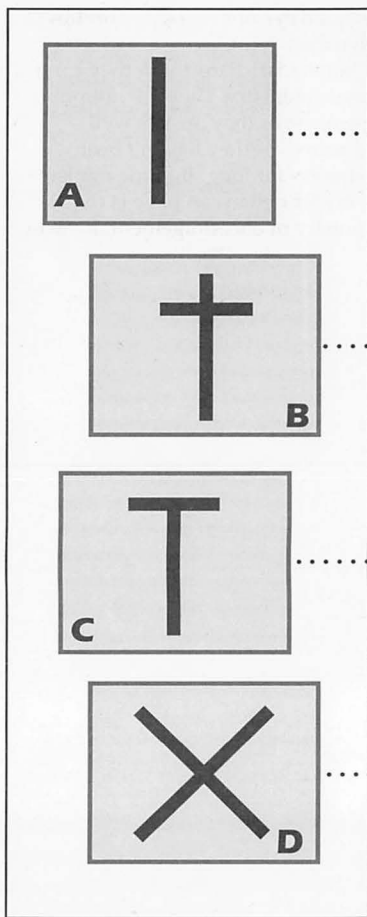
Our faith often meets severe tests, but it endures because it is more than an I-hope-so faith. Christian faith feeds on solid evidence. When faith wavers, we can go back again and again and look at the facts of the New Testament. Our faith can be reinforced by meditating often on the Gospel accounts of Christ's suffering on the cross.

In the end, Paul wrote, it does not really matter whether we die before Jesus comes or not. "[Christ] died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him" (I Thess. 5:10). The sleep mentioned in this verse refers, not to spiritual insensitivity, as in verses 6 and 7, but to death, as in 4:13 and 15. Whether living or dead, our destiny will be the same: we will live together with Christ.

Everlasting pleasure, not wrath, awaits the Christian. Our existence has an eternal dimension that will outlast time as we know it. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (II Cor. 4:17).

Until Jesus comes, Christians are to build each other up in their faith (I Thess. 5:11; compare 4:18). Paul knew this was happening in the church of Thessalonica, but since the Thessalonians were perplexed about the day of the Lord, they needed to be reminded to keep on encouraging each other. Because of their discouragement, Paul told them to keep on doing their good works for each other. This was no time to let up.

The ministry of encouragement never ends, because various church members are always encountering different tests and troubles. One person comes down with a serious illness, another faces marital problems, another loses a job, and so on. People are lonely, fearful, and depressed. Therefore, we need to



Paul wrote that Christ "died for us so that . . . we may live together with him" (I Thess. 5:10). Above are four shapes of crosses used by the Romans. Jesus was almost certainly crucified on a cross like the one at letter B, since a placard was mounted above His head.

keep an eye out for opportunities to give them a lift.

Some Christians think they can't have a ministry. They are not public speakers, or they are not well educated, or they haven't been believers for long. But one ministry every Christian can have is the ministry of encouragement. Each of

us can say words of comfort to the discouraged with whom we come in contact.

*Ask Yourself . . . Who can I bring some encouragement to today?*

# 7

## Guidance on Christian Conduct

**I Thessalonians 5:12-28**

### **a** **Respect for Church Leaders (5:12, 13)**

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.

—I Thessalonians 5:12

In the practical portion of the letter until this point, Paul covered the topics of sexual purity, brotherly love, responsible habits, the order of events at the return of Christ, and the timing of the day of the Lord. As he wound up the letter, he delivered a last flurry of instructions without going into depth on any of them. He left it up to his readers to develop

## **LEADERSHIP** in the Early Church

**W**hen planting a new church, Paul's practice seems to have been to wait and see who displayed the natural and spiritual abilities for leadership. Then he would urge others in the church to accept the leaders.

In the earliest years of the Christian church (during Paul's lifetime), there probably was some fluidity in the ways in which leadership emerged. Several titles for leaders—including apostle, overseer (or bishop), elder (or presbyter), and deacon—recur in the New Testament, but in some cases these titles appear to have different meanings in different contexts.

After the apostles left the scene, leadership in the church became formalized with three main offices: bishop, presbyter, and deacon. In the postapostolic period, each city had its bishop, the spiritual leader for all Christians in that city. Each church had presbyters who as a group made decisions for the church. Each church also had a number of deacons—people who performed practical, everyday services.

for themselves the implications of these instructions.

Verses 12 and 13 urged the Thessalonians to respect their leaders. Before Paul had left Thessalonica, he had probably appointed leaders to take charge of the newly formed church. In making these appointments he would have relied on his spiritual sensitivity to help him choose people who met moral criteria and seemed gifted for spiritual leadership. Now Paul wanted to help make sure that these leaders received the respect they deserved.

It may be that Paul was addressing an existing problem and not just trying to prevent future disrespect for church leaders. He may have heard that some in the Thessalonian church did not adequately appreciate what their leaders were doing for them. If so, he hoped to correct the problem before it got worse.

Paul did not ask the Thessalonians to respect their leaders just because those people held positions of authority. Rather, he urged respect because the leaders had earned it with their hard work. Day after day those people went about the business of instructing, guiding, and caring for the members of the church. The leaders were not doing this to gain anything for themselves, but they at least deserved respect. In fact, Paul went so far as to say that the Thessalonians' respect for their leaders ought to be mixed with love.

The need for church leaders to be respected is as great today as ever. It's easy to criticize leaders who do something we don't like. It's easy to

take for granted their hard work. Yet no church can function effectively without leaders, and no leader can function effectively without respect. We must give our leaders all the credit that is their due for serving us as they serve Christ.

*Ask Yourself . . . Do I respect and love the leaders of my church? If so, do I let them know that?*

Verse 13 closes with the brief command "Live in peace with each other." This may be an independent instruction, referring to peaceableness in general. But more likely Paul meant it as the conclusion to what he had said about respecting church leaders. To live in peace with one another means, among other things, to have a proper leader-follower relationship. And to have a proper leader-follower relationship means, among other things, to live in peace with one another.



## **Concern for Fellow Christians (5:14, 15)**

**We urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. —I Thessalonians 5:14**

Unlike verses 12 and 13, which deal with the single subject of respect for church leaders, verses 14 and 15 contain instructions on

various topics. But these instructions are all similar in that they all deal with relationships among believers.

Here Paul addressed himself again to the "brothers" (vs. 14). This indicates that his instructions were for all the Thessalonian believers, and not just the church's leaders. The actions Paul was about to command are ones that any Christian can do.

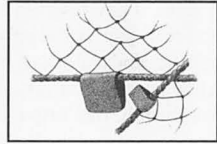
Verse 14 contains four brief instructions: "Warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

We have already seen that some in the Thessalonian church did not want to work (4:11, 12). Here Paul urged the idlers' fellow believers to warn them. The idlers needed to be reminded that a dependent, unproductive life is not God's ideal for anyone. Maybe a little peer pressure would put those people back to work.

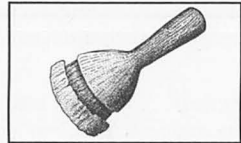
This is the first time we learn that there were timid people in the church (5:14). Perhaps these were people made anxious by the persecution going on.

## **MORE TOOLS of the TRADES**

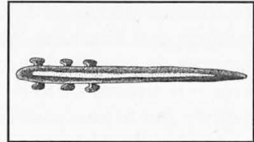
**PORTION  
OF  
WEIGHTED  
NET**



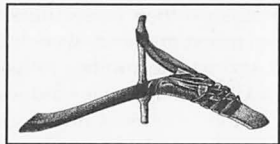
**MALLET**



**KNIFE**



**ADZ**



*"Warn those who are idle," Paul said (1 Thess. 5:14). Above are some of the tools commonly used in Paul's day.*



The timid did not need criticism or warning, as did the idle, but instead needed encouragement to trust in the Lord.

The word for “weak” could be used of any kind of weakness: physical, moral, or spiritual. In this context the emphasis seems to be on spiritual weakness. The “weak” in Thessalonica had not grown much in their faith. They needed help to develop strong spiritual muscles.

For all the Thessalonian believers, patience was required. The Thessalonian church, like any church, contained people with diverse ideas and patterns of behavior. Everybody had some kind of failing. So patience was needed to maintain harmony.

*Ask Yourself . . . Who do I need to warn, encourage, help, or bear patiently with?*

Paul’s command in verse 15 contrasts revenge and kindness. “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.”

It may be that Paul had heard some Thessalonians were seeking revenge against their persecutors. Or perhaps church members were lashing out against one another. Either way, the Christian ideal is kindness “to each other” (fellow Christians) and “to everyone else” (people at large).

For many people, thoughts of retaliation immediately come to mind following an attack upon them. Jesus, however, counseled love for one’s enemies (Matt. 5:44).

Paul and Peter, in their letters, urged believers not to practice retaliation (Rom. 12:17; I Pet. 3:9). Revenge only perpetuates cycles of violence, whereas kindness opens the door for an enemy to become a friend. Ultimately, all wrongdoing will be punished—but by God, not by us.

*Ask Yourself . . . How can I treat with kindness someone who committed a wrong against me?*



## **Joy, Prayer, and Thanksgiving (5:16-18)**

**Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.**

—I Thessalonians 5:16-18

In this passage, Paul emphasized that it is God’s will for Christian living to be characterized by joy, prayer, and thanksgiving (vss. 16-18). Immediately, however, readers wonder not so much about Paul’s commands as about the qualifiers he attached to them. It’s not just “be joyful,” but “be joyful always”; not just “pray,” but “pray continually”; not just “give thanks,” but “give thanks in all circumstances” (emphasis added).

Here is a consistency of Christian living that few people can attain. Was Paul unrealistic? Did he hold out an impossible standard? It seems

obvious there will be times when we are not joyful, times when we are not praying, and times when we are complaining rather than giving thanks.

Paul knew that, of course, but he also knew that commitment to Christ brings in the power of the Holy Spirit. He was trying to elevate the sights of the Thessalonian believers, torn as they were by persecution from without and problems within. If they were to make any progress in the faith, they needed to be called to a higher—seemingly impossible—standard. Little would be gained by settling for mediocrity.

Joy, for the Christian, is not a reaction to pleasant circumstances. If it were, our joy would necessarily be intermittent, depending on what happens to us. Rather, true joy comes from a relationship with Jesus and from the Spirit's presence in our lives. That means our joy may continue even in the midst of unpleasant circumstances.

Prayer can be of many kinds and can be inserted into our daily routines in many ways. Prayer is simply talking to God about what is on our hearts and minds. But for prayer to be continual, we must cultivate a spirit of prayer that permeates everything we do. We must keep the lines of communication with God open at all times.

Thanksgiving is a matter of recognizing before God all the good things He does for us. Of course, not everything in life is good; the

bad comes our way too. And yet, if we look, there is much good to be found. Even the bad things are used by God for the ultimate good of His followers, and so we can give thanks in all circumstances.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How can I make joy, prayer, and thanksgiving more regular components of my life?*

---

## **d** True Prophecy (5:19-22)

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

—I Thessalonians 5:19-22

Paul's last group of instructions appears to have been a response to a problem in the Thessalonian church having to do with prophecy.

From the New Testament, we know that the early church had prophets, more or less like the prophets of the Old Testament era. The Christian prophets were primarily prophets in the sense that they used God's Word to declare God's truth to people; in other words, they were preachers. Occasionally, however, they did predict the future (Acts 11:27, 28; 21:10, 11). These people played an important role in the developing community of faith.

Apparently prophecies were being given in the Thessalonian church (II Thess. 2:2), and it wasn't going down well with all the people. For

# Prophecy Today

## A Point of Dispute



**W**hile conservative theologians are agreed that prophets operated in the early church, they are split over the question of whether there is true prophecy today in the sense of direct revelations from God or predictions of the future.

- **PRO.** Those who believe in present-day prophecy point out that prophecy is mentioned frequently as one of the spiritual gifts, most (if not all) of which are still given to believers. They say that God uses prophecy today, as He always has, because He wants to give instruction to His people about current or local issues not specifically treated in the Bible.

- **CON.** Those who don't believe in present-day prophecy say that the gift came to an end as the New Testament was completed. Prophecy is no longer necessary because Scripture is available as God's communication to His people.

some reason, some people didn't believe in or didn't like the idea of direct revelations coming from the Spirit of God. They tried to squelch these revelations—which amounted to trying to squelch the Spirit.

That was wrong, said Paul. If God wanted to speak to the Thessalonians, then they ought to listen with open ears.

But if contempt for prophecy was one extreme to be avoided, credulity toward everything called prophecy was another. So Paul advised his readers to “test everything” (I Thess. 5:21a). In other words, they were to try to determine if an alleged prophecy was truly from God or not.

Paul did not describe how to test

prophecies. At the least he must have meant his readers were to compare alleged prophecies with known teachings from God. A contradiction would prove that a so-called “prophetic” message was false.

Once a prophecy was tested, it would prove to be either true (good) or false (evil). Paul advised, “Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (vss. 21b, 22). The word for “good” was used of coins that ring true. When it came to prophecy, the Thessalonians were to keep the real thing and discard the counterfeits.

*Ask Yourself . . . What tests can I apply to religious teachings I hear or read?*



## **Benediction and Final Words (5:23-28)**

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

**—I Thessalonians 5:23, 24**

Paul closed his letter with a prayer for his readers as well as some final requests. Thus the communication between founder and church ends warmly.

Paul's benediction (vs. 23) reveals what he wanted most for the Thessalonians. He wanted them to be made thoroughly holy so that they would be blameless at the coming of Christ (compare 3:13).

The apostle did not want the Thessalonians to be just a little bit holy. He wanted them to be sanctified "through and through" (5:23). He wanted them to be blameless in their "whole spirit, soul and body"—that is, in their whole person. Paul was thinking big.

The Thessalonians could not make themselves holy and blameless; God alone could accomplish such a tall order. Here God is called "the God of peace," referring to spiritual prosperity in the fullest measure. Paul often referred to God in this way when he closed his letters (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; II Cor. 13:11; Phil.

4:9; II Thess. 3:16). Here he also said God is "faithful" (I Thess. 5:24). Those whom He has called He will sanctify.

*Ask Yourself . . . How has the God of peace been faithful in sanctifying me?*

When Paul concluded his prayer for the Thessalonian believers, he requested their prayers for him (vs. 25). He valued their participation with him in his life and his work through prayer.

Paul next requested that his personal greetings be extended to "all the brothers" (vs. 26). That "all" is important. Although Paul had criticized things that some of the Thessalonians had done, he still loved them all and wanted them all for his friends.

Specifically, Paul asked his readers to convey his greetings by kissing one another for him. This may seem rather personal to us, but in that day kissing was as common a means of greeting as shaking hands is today. Christians took over this practice from secular society and made it a ritual, calling it the "holy kiss" or "kiss of love" (see Rom. 16:16; I Cor. 16:20; II Cor. 13:12; I Pet. 5:14). Probably men kissed only men, and women only women, with the holy kiss so as to avoid the appearance of immorality.

Paul also commanded that his letter be read to all the believers (I Thess. 5:27). Few people could read at that time, and there was only one original of the letter, so Paul wanted it read at a church meeting. Paul wanted everyone to get the



benefit of his teaching.

The phrase translated "I charge you" is strong language. It can also mean "I put you on oath." Paul was serious about the letter's being read publicly.

Before this point, Paul had generally used "we," including his missionary colleagues Silas and Timothy (1:1). Now Paul said, "I charge

you . . ." (5:27, emphasis added).

This wording may mean that whereas the rest of the book was dictated through a scribe, Paul picked up the pen to write this line. If so, this was another way of Paul's emphasizing his command.

Paul's farewell took the form of a brief prayer: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (vs. 28).

## **How Many Parts Do We Have?**

**S**ome theologians have taken I Thessalonians 5:23, among other passages, as evidence that each person is made up of three essential parts. Other theologians believe that the Scriptures support some other view of human nature. The two main views are the dichotomist [die-KOT-uh-mist] and trichotomist [tri-KOT-uh-mist] views.

- **Dichotomist.** A person is made up of a material aspect, the body, and an immaterial aspect, the soul (or spirit). The body is mortal, while the soul (or spirit) is immortal. At resurrection, the two will be joined forever.

- **Trichotomist.** A person has three elements: a body, a soul (the seat of reason, emotions, and personality), and a spirit (the element that can perceive and act on spiritual matters). The spirit and the soul are immortal and will be joined with the resurrected body.

# 8

## Persecution and Justice

### II Thessalonians 1

#### **a** Greeting and Thanksgiving (1:1-4)

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.

—II Thessalonians 1:3

Paul began his second letter to the church at Thessalonica with a traditional greeting from his missionary team, which included Silas and Timothy. They were well known to the Thessalonian believers and so needed no introduction. Paul then reminded the Thessalonians of their heritage and position: they were members

of the church and were rooted in God and in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Being members of “the church” (vs. 1) gave the Thessalonian believers a corporate identity. They comprised an entirely new called-out community of faith. They were distinct from their pagan neighbors in Thessalonica.

**T**he word translated “church” in II Thessalonians 1:1 is *ekklesia* [eck-klay-SEE-uh], which might more literally be translated “called-out ones.” The Greeks never used *ekklesia* of a religious group; for them, it referred to a body called together to make political and judicial decisions. Paul took his meaning of the word from the way it was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. There, *ekklesia* meant a public assembly of God’s people.

Paul infused *ekklesia* with a distinctively Christian meaning. As people respond to the Gospel with faith, they are called out of “the world” and are joined together to form a new community. Faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is what marks Christians as different from those in “the world.”

**‘Church’:  
Called-out  
Ones**



Not only was the Thessalonians' church rooted in the Father and in the Son (vs. 1), so also were their grace and peace (vs. 2). Paul recognized that all the blessings Christians enjoy have their source in God.

Perhaps some of the Thessalonians felt somewhat unworthy of Paul's commendations in his first letter (see I Thess. 1:2, 3). That would help explain why he repeated his commendations of them in the opening lines of his second letter (II Thess. 1:3, 4). He wanted to strengthen those who were wilting under the stress of continuing persecution.

Paul's initial concern was to assure the Christians of his steadfast prayers for them (vs. 3). He did not offer them an escape plan or a promise of political relief. He promised them his prayers.

In this letter Paul claimed victory for the Thessalonians. This would have been a tremendous morale booster. As noted in previous lessons, this was a church under siege. The Thessalonian believers were enduring "persecutions and trials" (vs. 4). No doubt some of the persecutions were physical, but more likely Paul had in mind social stigma, ridicule, the loss of status, and even the loss of their livelihood. The believers were paying a heavy price for their faithfulness to Christ.

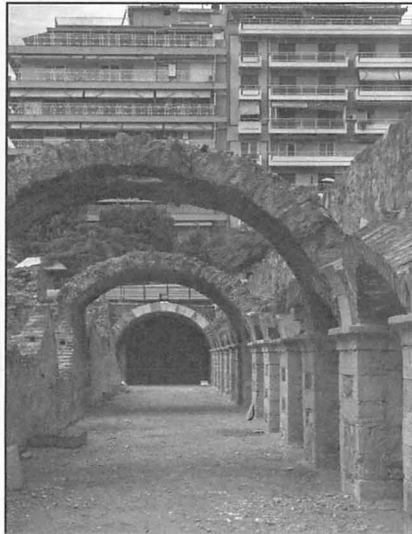
*Ask Yourself . . . What price have I had to pay for my faithfulness to Christ?*

If we look at the difficult conditions they were enduring,

we would not expect Paul to claim victory, but he did. Why? Rather than accepting defeat, quitting, and disbanding their assembly, the Christians were marching ahead boldly—so much so that Paul could boast about them among the other churches (vs. 4). Their faithful perseverance in the midst of adversity was a powerful witness not only to the citizens of Thessalonica but to the Christians in other cities as well.

One might expect a church under pressure to shrivel up and die. Persecution causes that to happen sometimes. But the Thessalonian believers refused to be overcome by persecution. These Christians not only were surviving but were also growing in faith and increasing in love (vs. 3). This was an answer to Paul's prayer in I Thessalonians 3:12.

*Ruins of Roman-era shops in the Greek city of Salonika (formerly Thessalonica).*



---

The hallmark of the Christian community is love. Love gives us the mutual support we need to be steadfast through our trials. We demonstrate love by caring for each other's physical, social, and emotional needs. We could not survive without such caring support.

*Ask Yourself . . . How can I show my love and support for my fellow church members?*

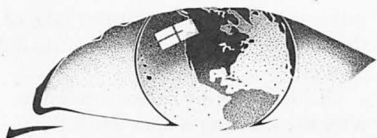
---

## **b** God's Justice and Mercy (1:5-7a)

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.

—II Thessalonians 1:6, 7a

No persecution is easy to take. But if we view our troubles from an eternal perspective, that helps us to endure in faith. Paul said that the Thessalonians' perseverance amid suffering proved that God was preparing them to be fit for His kingdom (vs. 5). Their steadfastness, which was a result of God's grace working in their lives, showed they were truly God's people. Suffering on behalf of the Kingdom was something they shared with Paul and his companions. The



## Paul's Perspective on Suffering

The apostle Paul kept an eternal perspective on life. In the midst of his many hardships, that perspective is what kept him on an even keel. He wrote to the Corinthians, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen" (II Cor. 4:17, 18). The same theme comes out in Romans 8:18: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Looking back on his many exemplary human attainments, Paul said they were "rubbish" compared to the "surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Phil. 3:8). Something far more important than his material well-being occupied Paul's attention. He wanted "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (vs. 10).

missionaries suffered for the sake of the Gospel, but the new converts did as well.

Old Testament writers wondered why the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer. This theme echoes through the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Book of Job. But in the New Testament, the suffering of believers is seen in an entirely different light. If people in Old Testament times were surprised, New Testament Christians were not, because they had been told by Jesus and the apostles to expect suffering. It was part of their birthright as followers of Christ. What had happened to Him would happen to them also (John 15:18-21; Phil. 1:29).

Armed with this knowledge, the Thessalonian believers could entrust themselves to God's wise and loving judgment. Their suffering was not senseless; it was for God's kingdom. What a difference it makes to know that suffering counts for something!

God's justice includes not only making suffering worthwhile but also punishing the oppressors. In a moral universe, sin cannot go unpunished. Oppressors seem to think they are immune to God's moral laws because God does not execute judgment immediately. But God will have the last word. Punishment is the ultimate outcome of sin.

Furthermore, God would eventually send relief to the Thessalonians and the missionaries alike.

*Ask Yourself . . . How can I develop an eternal perspective on the troubles I face?*



## **The Coming Judgment (1:7b-10)**

**This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.**

**—II Thessalonians 1:7b, 8**

The Thessalonian believers were enduring trouble and distress because of the actions of evil people. Paul could not say that their situation would suddenly improve. True, justice was coming in the form of punishment for the persecutors and relief for the persecuted. But that would not necessarily happen until "the Lord Jesus is revealed" (vs. 7b); in other words, at the Second Coming.

Paul looked down the long road of history and revealed the ultimate destiny of "those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (vs. 8). Therefore, his writing goes far beyond the immediate trials of the Thessalonians. What we have here is a consideration of the destiny of humankind.

According to Jesus, unbelievers now live under the threat of God's condemnation and wrath (see John 3:18, 36). Outwardly, they may appear to be secure and comfortable, but they are skating on thin ice. In general terms, the apostle Paul revealed when their judgment will take place.

At some unspecified time in the future, Jesus Christ Himself will judge all humanity. He now sits at the Father's right hand. But one day—no one but the Father knows when—He will be "revealed from heaven" (II Thess. 1:7b). Paul used the word *apokalupsei* [ah-poh-kah-LOOP-say], which stresses the unveiling of Christ's glory and greatness. Paul said that Jesus will appear in three ways: (1) "from heaven," (2) "in blazing fire," and (3) "with his powerful angels." This picture of Jesus' appearing is expanded with striking imagery in Revelation 19:11-16.

God's just punishment is reserved for those who do not "know" Him and who do not obey Christ's Gospel (II Thess. 1:8). Divine vengeance is free of personal spite; the word translated "punish" is related to justice.

Knowing God and obeying the Gospel are not two different qualifications for escaping divine judgment. One can "know God" in the theological sense only by obeying the Gospel. Saving knowledge of God comes from obedience to Christ. To "obey the gospel" is to admit and confess one's sin, repent, and welcome Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

We often use the expression "believe the Gospel." That's a common biblical term as well. But a person cannot genuinely believe the Gospel without obeying it. Paul told the Romans that his apostolic commission was to call people "to the obedience that comes from

faith" (Rom. 1:5). Believe, trust, obey—all are components of a valid, life-changing knowledge of God. Without such an intimate relationship with the Creator and Judge, there is no escaping His punishment.

*Ask Yourself . . . Am I obeying the Gospel?*

Paul went on to describe the fate of unbelievers. Their destruction will be "everlasting" (II Thess. 1:9), which means unending, whatever further meaning it may have. "Destruction" does not mean annihilation, but ruin. It will include banishment from God's presence and majesty. These are facts people of the world choose to ignore—facts that even some Christians find distasteful and are unwilling to profess publicly. But denial does not change the fact of eternal punishment.

The Bible describes in horrific terms the just punishment that awaits all who are not made righteous (e.g., Ps. 9:17; Isa. 33:14; Matt. 22:13; Luke 16:23-26; Rev. 9:1; 20:10; 21:8). But perhaps the most terrible consequence of all is that described here in verse 9—to be forever shut out from God's power.

Such an existence will be bereft of all that is true and good—blessings that are taken for granted by those who choose to remain separate from God. All beauty, truth, pleasure, and love—all that they consider worthwhile in life—comes about only because of God. If hell is separation from God, it will have none of life's pleasures He mercifully



## Everlasting Destruction

**P**aul declared that unbelievers “will be punished with everlasting destruction” (II Thess. 1:9). Here Paul was surely referring to punishment in hell.

The New Testament provides a number of clues to the nature of hell. Hell is a place of raging fire (Heb. 10:27), a place of blackest darkness (II Pet. 2:17). There, people weep and gnash their teeth in torment (Matt. 8:12). The inhabitants of hell can expect no relief (Rev. 14:11). Dwelling in hell means a separation from Christ (Matt. 7:23) but not from Satan and his demons (25:41). Hell causes the destruction of both body and soul (10:28). It is worse than death (Heb. 10:28, 29).

grants to a human’s earthly existence.

When Jesus is revealed from heaven, He will execute just punishment on unbelievers. He also will bring glory to His people (II Thess. 1:10). Paul contrasted the fate of humanity’s two groups of people—those who believe the Gospel and those who don’t. For those who placed their faith in Christ, His revelation will bring glory and pleasure, far above anything we can imagine.

The Lord Jesus will be “glorified in his holy people.” These are the same ones who are persecuted, oppressed, and treated as worthless by evil people in the present age. But these “rejects” will be the means of bringing glory to Jesus Christ. And they will share His glory.

Christians will marvel at their returning Lord and Saviour. They will be lost in amazement. They will admire Him with wonder.

Rather than being depressed, the Thessalonians were to reinforce their minds with thoughts of God’s justice and His love for them. They would be included in the revelation of Christ’s glory because they had believed Paul’s testimony to them (II Thess. 1:10). His testimony, of course, was the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection for their sins. Christian faith rests on verifiable evidence. That’s what Paul proclaimed and the church believed.

*Ask Yourself . . . If Jesus returns today, will I be ready for Him?*

## **d Prayer for Worthiness and Fruitfulness (1:11, 12)**

We constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. —II Thessalonians 1:11

Paul brought his readers back to the present after giving them a glimpse of God's judgment of unbelievers in the future. How should they live now? What could they do in the present to make their lives fruitful and productive?

Paul reminded the Thessalonians again of his persevering prayers for them. He would not forget them; he would not abandon them. Rather, he would continue to pray for them.

"With this in mind" (vs. 11)—"this" being God's plan to punish the wicked and reward the righteous—Paul revealed the essence of his prayers. What did he really desire for the church? That the Christians would live up to their high and holy calling.

"You will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God," Paul had told the Thessalonians (vs. 5). But still he prayed for that outcome. Was he in any doubt about it? Not really, but this was a reminder that they were really living for God and not for themselves. In other words, their lives were to match their calling.

This should be our highest aspiration—to be worthy of our calling. This doesn't mean we can ever earn or deserve God's favor. God's mercy and grace are freely given and totally undeserved. But we can be "worthy" in the sense that we live in such a way that we demonstrate that God has chosen us to be His children.

*Ask Yourself . . . Is God proud to call me one of His children?*

Paul also prayed that the Thessalonians' plans would be fulfilled and their faith would be satisfying. He gave them a promising, hopeful outlook. They were under the gun, so to speak, but God's power was still available to them. God's power applied to their plans could liberate them from depression, from feelings of uselessness or despair.

Of course, their aspirations were to arise out of their faith. What could they aspire to? Boldness and courage, a powerful witness, and, most of all, keeping their faith in Christ. They could envision new ways of providing material help and moral support for each other.

These good purposes God would enable with His power. Their faith would be fueled as they saw God at work in their midst. Sometime in the future they would be vindicated, but in the meantime they could be useful to God and be His instruments of peace and righteousness.

Paul wanted to see the name of Jesus Christ glorified through the Thessalonians' success and



fruitfulness (vs. 12). The two go hand in hand. When the church prospers in boldness, in faith, in worship, in service, and in witnessing, Jesus is exalted in the community. People take notice. They wonder what motivates the Christians. How can they be so kind and helpful to each other?

The business of the church is to draw attention to Jesus, not to plan programs or to build buildings. As we exalt and glorify Jesus Christ, we are glorified in Him. That is the picture Jesus drew of the vine and

the branches (John 15). Abiding in the vine, the branches are fruitful; cut off from the vine they are useless.

*Ask Yourself . . . Is Christ glorified by the things I do and the way I do them?*

Paul put the Thessalonians' persecution in the right perspective. He told them to endure it with perseverance and faith, to trust in God's judgment, to be confident in His purposes, and to hope in His power.

# 2

## The Truth about the Second Coming

### II Thessalonians 2:1-12

#### **a** The False Report (2:1, 2)

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.

—II Thessalonians 2:1, 2

At this point in his second letter to the Thessalonian believers, the apostle Paul returned to one of the subjects he had discussed in his first letter (I Thess. 4:13-18): the return of Christ for His Church. But then he went on to amplify some details surrounding the day of the Lord and judgment (II Thess. 1:7-9).

Paul was alarmed by a report attributing to him the false declaration that the believers had somehow missed Christ's return, and that the day of the Lord was already upon them (2:1, 2). Paul wanted them to know the defining events that would usher in Christ's Second Coming in judgment (vss. 3,4).

Likewise, he wanted them to believe in God's judgment (vss. 11, 12).

Paul was distressed by the confusion among the believers. Apparently many were asking, "Are we in the end times?" "Has Jesus already returned?" "Have we missed His coming?"

The Christians were "unsettled" and "alarmed" (vs. 2). The Greek word translated "unsettled" pictures the restless tossing of a ship not securely tied down. The word for "alarmed" shows a continuing state of agitation.

Why were the Thessalonian believers in such turmoil? Paul blamed it on a message purported to have come from him. This message falsely claimed that the second coming of Christ had already occurred, and the Thessalonians had missed it.

Unfortunately, Paul was not as specific at this point as we could wish. He wrote in vague terms about a "prophecy, report or letter" that had been attributed to him. Was the "prophecy" one of Paul's sermons that had been misinterpreted, or a total fabrication? Was the "report" a message from Paul that had been distorted, or a total fabrication? Was



## **'Unsettled'**

**T**he word translated "unsettled" in II Thessalonians 2:2 comes from the verb *saleuo* [sah-LEW-oh]. Its literal meaning is "to shake," referring to a to-and-fro movement such as that of a reed being shaken by the wind (Matt. 11:7).

In a figurative sense, *saleuo* describes a person who is being blown back and forth and being tossed about by what he or she is experiencing. A good visual image would be a ship in a violent storm (see Eph. 4:14). An "unsettled" person is distraught, distressed, and agitated, and is not able to calm the storms in his or her life.

the "letter" Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (falsely interpreted), some other letter that has not survived, or a total fabrication?

Based on what Paul wrote, we simply cannot answer these questions. In fact, we can't even

say with certainty that Paul was attacking the authenticity of the "prophecy, report or letter." What we can say is that Paul was categorically denouncing the interpretation that certain false prophets were putting on whatever was in the "prophecy, report or letter." He firmly declared that nothing he had ever said or written could be correctly interpreted to mean that the Second Coming had already happened.

The Church has always been plagued by false prophets who are willing to distort the truth for personal reasons. The net result for Christians today who follow such opportunistic "prophets" is the same as it was for the Thessalonians: worry, unwarranted dogmatism, and eventual disillusionment when the prophecies aren't fulfilled.

*Ask Yourself . . . Have I ever been taken in by a false prophet?*

Paul's wise counsel to the Thessalonians is sorely needed today: Don't become unsettled or alarmed. Instead, we should check all prophetic teachings carefully, prayerfully, and intelligently. We should ask hard questions of those who claim to have the future all figured out. We should examine their motives. Do they primarily want to sell books and gain a following?

"Test everything. Hold on to the good," Paul had already cautioned (I Thess. 5:21). The Thessalonians, rather than being shaken, troubled, and excited, could hold on to what

the apostle had taught them. He had clearly said in his first letter that they would not miss the second coming of the Lord (4:17)

The church today clings to the written Word of God as the only safeguard against being thrown around like a storm-tossed ship.

The Bible is both our guide and our anchor in a world crammed with false ideas. We can know what we believe and why.

The church is responsible to emphasize what is clear in Scripture. But when the Bible is not precise in describing prophetic details, we cannot afford to be dogmatic. Sincere Bible scholars have taken different views on the details of prophecy (see pages 113 and 114).

*Ask Yourself . . . Am I confused about God's plans for the future? What can I do to help clarify that confusion?*



## **The Man of Lawlessness (2:3, 4)**

**Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.**

**—II Thessalonians 2:3**

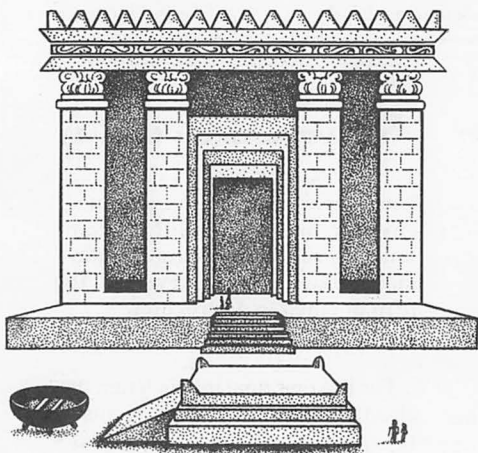
For the first time in this letter, the apostle referred to specific events yet to come that will precede the Lord's return. Paul had outlined God's plan to bring the unbelieving world to justice when Jesus comes in "blazing fire with his powerful angels" (1:7). But he had not mentioned anything that needed to happen first—anything that would let the Thessalonians know that Jesus had not already returned.



## **The Antichrist**

**F**rom the letters of John, we know that many people are "antichrists" (enemies of Christ), but one day there will arise a person who will be the Antichrist in the fullest sense (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; II John 7). Many Bible interpreters believe that the "man of lawlessness" Paul warned about (II Thess. 2:3) is identical with the Antichrist. Some Bible scholars have found references to this wicked figure in other passages as well, including Daniel 7:24-27; 8:9-12; 11:36-45, and Revelation 13.

Taken together, these Bible passages suggest that the Antichrist will use satanic power to perform miracles, will attempt to rule the world, and will claim to be God.



*This is Herod's temple, which existed in Jerusalem in Paul's time. Paul wrote that the man of lawlessness would set himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God (II Thess. 2:4).*

and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (vs. 4). He will be an awesome figure; nevertheless, Paul assured his readers that this false god is "doomed to destruction" (vs. 3).

*Ask Yourself . . . What trends, if any, do I see that indicate an increase in opposition to Christ?*

We may find the topics of the rebellion and the man of lawlessness to be fascinating, but Paul didn't give us many details to go on. His purpose here was not to satisfy curiosity about the rebellion and the man of lawlessness, but to make the point that since the

rebellion and man of lawlessness had not appeared, the day of the Lord could not yet have come.

To help his readers stand firm, Paul declared something of what will happen in the end times.

First, he said there will be a rebellion against God. Of course, people have always rebelled against God, but this will be worse than anything that has happened before. Paul underscored the climactic nature of this apostasy by calling it "the rebellion"—one that will far exceed anything else like it in human history (2:3, emphasis added; see also Matt. 24:10-12; I Tim. 4:1; II Tim. 3:1-9).

Second, "the man of lawlessness" will be revealed (II Thess. 2:3). This title is appropriate because he will break God's laws. Presumably, this person will be the leader of the rebellion. "He will oppose

## **C The Restrainer of Evil (2:5-7)**

The secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.

—II Thessalonians 2:7

How embarrassing to be told to remember something you have already been told! The Thessalonian

Christians were distraught because they had forgotten or failed to apply what Paul had told them in person (vs. 5). Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for people's conduct to fail to measure up to what they know and what they have been taught.

Paul reminded his readers that the ultimate revelation of the powers of darkness is being held back by someone or something (we don't know who or what). In other words, neither the Thessalonians' world nor ours is as bad as it could possibly be. The full-fledged manifestation of Satan that will be exhibited through the man of lawlessness has not yet occurred.

Currently, the appearance of the man of lawlessness, one of Satan's operatives, is being delayed. When evil seems rampant, we can keep in mind that the worst is yet to come. The man of lawlessness will not appear on the scene until his time comes according to God's sovereign will.

While the man of lawlessness is being kept back for now, "the secret power of lawlessness is already at work" in the world (vs. 7). Perhaps the same idea was expressed by John when he said, "Every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world" (I John 4:3). In other words, even though the Antichrist has not yet appeared, many people presently in the world are opposed to God. We must be alert to anti-

Christian influences now.

At the same time, however, the full force of the secret power of lawlessness is being held back until the

## **Restrainer of Lawlessness**

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "You know what is holding [the man of lawlessness] back" (II Thess. 2:6). But we don't know what that is. Not for sure.

Bible scholars have long debated Paul's meaning in this passage. The identification of the restrainer of lawlessness is made all the harder by Paul's using a neuter (impersonal) participle—translated "what is holding"—in verse 6 and a masculine (personal) participle—translated "the one who now holds"—in verse 7.

Here are some of the identifications of the restrainer of lawlessness that have been made throughout history:

- the Roman Empire and its emperor,
- the principle of law and government,
- the preaching of the Gospel,
- the Jewish state,
- the Church, and
- the Holy Spirit.



person or the thing holding it back is removed. This meant the Thessalonians could expect that a series of events had yet to take place before the day of the Lord.

*Ask Yourself . . . What am I currently doing to restrain the spread of evil?*



## **The Coming of the Lawless One (2:8-10)**

**The lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. —II Thessalonians 2:8**

Paul now turned to a further description of "the lawless one" (vs. 8). He had chronology in mind: "And then." Although we cannot precisely identify future times and dates, or personalities either, we can grasp the broad sweep of Paul's teaching. Three major events will precede the Lord's coming: (1) a sudden acceleration of apostasy (vs. 3); (2) the removal of a restraining influence (vss. 6, 7); and (3) the complete unveiling of the lawless one, who will be animated by Satan and will oppose God, attempting to exalt himself above God (vss. 4, 9).

The mystery of lawlessness and the mystery of Christ develop simultaneously in the world, leading to an inevitable clash, in which Christ will triumph.

Christ's triumph will involve His personal return to earth to destroy the Antichrist and to reward His followers.

Paul gave a graphic picture of the lawless one's tactics and powers. This self-glorifying individual will be under Satan's control. He will have unusual abilities to perform miracles, signs, and wonders. Satan's work will be seen in the most remarkable deceptions.

The tragic outcome will be destruction for people who will be taken in by this Satan-empowered miracle worker. People usually flock after unusual miracles, but a miracle in and of itself proves nothing. Miracles will be used to deceive people into worshiping the lawless one.

Why will people fall into this snare? Because "they refused to love the truth" (vs. 10).

God's truth must not only be acknowledged; it must also be loved. That means ruling one's life according to God's Word. It means accepting and living by the Gospel. To reject the Gospel is to reject salvation.

In the midst of terrible deception and wickedness, the Lord Jesus Christ will emerge victorious (vs. 8). He will "overthrow [the lawless one] with the breath of his mouth and destroy [the lawless one] by the splendor of his coming." Paul earlier described Jesus as coming "in blazing fire with his powerful angels" (1:7).

Because Jesus Christ is the ultimate Victor, if we are living in personal union with Him, we

# Terms for the SECOND COMING

**T**he New Testament writers used three Greek words when referring to the second coming of Christ:

- **Parousia** [pah-roo-SEE-uh] carries the ideas of "presence" and "coming," especially the official visit of a person of high rank (a king or emperor). The word implies personal presence and excited states. In I Thessalonians 4:15 and II Thessalonians 2:8 it is translated "coming."

- **Apokalupsis** [ah-poh-KAHL-ihp-siss] means "revelation" or "disclosure." In connection with end-time events, it refers to the unveiling of Christ at His second coming. This may suggest the suddenness of His coming. The noun is translated as if it were a verb ("revealed") in I Corinthians 1:7, II Thessalonians 1:7, and I Peter 4:13.

- **Epiphaneia** [epp-ih-FAH-nay-uh] means "appearing" or "appearance" and refers to a visible manifestation of a hidden divinity. In Titus 2:13, Christ's "appearing" is said to be "glorious." This idea of divine glory is taken one step further in II Thessalonians 2:8, where *epiphaneia* is translated "splendor."

Taken together, the three words tell us that Christ's second coming will involve His personal presence, His unveiling, and His appearing in power and glory.

need not worry or speculate. Jesus is King, no matter how strong or clever the man of lawlessness may be. Jesus will destroy him at His coming.

That is our ultimate hope and confidence. We can stand firm on that and hold fast to it, even though we can't see how all the pieces in Paul's prophetic puzzle will fit together.

*Ask Yourself . . . What steps can I take to protect myself from being taken in by demonic deception*



## A Powerful Delusion (2:11, 12)

God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

—II Thessalonians 2:11, 12

These are two of the most tragic verses in Scripture. Paul revealed

the consequences of following spiritual deceivers and their deceptions.

The phrase “for this reason” shows the grounds of God’s judgment (vs. 11). For the reason that people will refuse to love the truth, God will send a “powerful delusion” upon them. He will use their sin as a punishment against them. He will let them continue in their false and sinful ways “so that they will believe the lie.”

The world is filled with liars and lies, all of them inspired by Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44). But the lie Paul was talking about here was not any lie, but “the lie” (II Thess. 2:11). It is the lie that the man of lawlessness is really God and must

be worshiped as God (vs. 4).

Those who believe the lie “will be condemned” (vs. 12). This presumably refers to punishment in hell. The people will deserve such punishment because they “have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.”

More than intellect is involved here. In Scripture, belief always includes the will and the emotions. Paul showed how they are connected. Refusing to believe the truth and delighting in wickedness are related.

*Ask Yourself . . . How can I help myself to avoid being snared by one of Satan’s lies?*

# 10

## Standing Firm in the Lord

### II Thessalonians 2:13—3:5

#### **a** Holding to Paul's Teachings (2:13-15)

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. —II Thessalonians 2:13-15

The apostle Paul foresaw a time when Christ will judge the man of lawlessness, along with all who will follow this satanic deceiver (vss. 8-12). But Paul hastened to assure his readers that they would not be among those judged. They were destined for blessing by God (vss. 13-15).

Paul thanked God for the Thessalonian believers—not so much because of who they were in themselves as because of who they had become through God's grace to

them. Paul called the Thessalonians people who were "loved by the Lord" (vs. 13):

God had shown His love for the Thessalonians by choosing them for salvation. This shows that God's love is not a vague, emotion-charged slogan—the basis of some blind hope for a silver lining in the clouds. God's love has been verified in history by what He has done for the church.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How has God shown His love for me?*

From describing the future, when Christ will judge lawless people, Paul turned his attention to the distant past. He said, "From the beginning God chose you to be saved." Paul made similar claims in other letters (example: Eph. 1:4).

These passages are understood in different ways by Christians. Some people believe that God long ago predestined some individuals (but not others) for receiving His salvation. Others say that God formed His plan of salvation long ago but that the matter of who receives salvation is determined by the exercise of free human will.

# Sharing Christ's Glory

**P**aul reminded the Thessalonians that God had called them through the Gospel so that they "might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (II Thess. 2:14). Other Bible passages likewise describe Christians as sharing Christ's glory—now, and even more so in the life to come.

Praying to the Father, Jesus said of His disciples, "I have given them the glory that you gave me" (John 17:22).

Paul wrote:

- "We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (II Cor. 3:18).

- "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:4).

- "God . . . calls you into his kingdom and glory" (I Thess. 2:12).

Peter wrote:

- "When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (I Pet. 5:4).

- "The God of all grace . . . called you to his eternal glory in Christ" (I Pet. 5:10).

The Thessalonians' salvation came "through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (II Thess. 2:13). Not one or the other, but both. In the Thessalonians' salvation, God the Holy Spirit had made unholy people holy, and the people themselves had put their faith in the Gospel truth.

At this point, we should note the contrast between the Thessalonian believers and the future followers of the man of lawlessness. Those who will be judged "have not believed the truth" (vs. 12), while the Thessalonians were saved "through belief in the truth" (vs. 13).

On a practical, historical level, Paul's preaching of the Gospel had been the means by which God had called the Thessalonians to salvation (vs. 14). No doubt, Paul was pleased and proud to have been used by God in this important way.

*Ask Yourself . . . How did God call me to salvation?*

One reason God called the Thessalonians to salvation was so that the Thessalonians "might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." This was a far different destiny than that awaiting the followers of the man of lawlessness. Glory, not judgment.



It's hard to comprehend the fact that one day believers will share in Christ's glory. Christ is the sinless Son of God; who are we to participate in His glory? But out of love, Jesus became like we are so that we might become like He is, and He is glorious.

Knowing that God has prepared glory for believers should not make us complacent. On the contrary, it should motivate us to serve God better. Because believers are destined for glory, we should be concerned about obeying the instructions God has given us in the Scriptures. Because believers are destined for glory, we should live as God's hands and mouth in the world—ministering to people's needs and proclaiming the Gospel boldly.

Paul told the Thessalonians, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter" (vs. 15). Paul's preaching of the Gospel had been effective as a means to their receiving salvation. Therefore, the Thessalonians should continue to heed what Paul taught. It was only logical.

The Thessalonians had been disturbed by a "prophecy, report or letter" falsely supposed to be from Paul (vs. 2). Paul wanted them to disregard such false teaching. But the real thing—that was another matter entirely.

*Ask Yourself . . . What can help me to stand firm and hold on to biblical truths I've been taught?*



## **Prayer for Courage and Strength (2:16, 17)**

**May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father . . . encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.**

**—II Thessalonians 2:16, 17**

If the Thessalonians were to stand firm and hold on to Gospel teachings, they would need help—divine help. So at this point in his letter, Paul prayed that God would encourage and strengthen them.

Paul invoked both the Lord Jesus Christ—God the Son—and God the Father in his prayer (vs. 16). Why Jesus first? Probably because Jesus was much in his thoughts. Usually he mentioned the Father first (example: I Thess. 1:1), but sometimes he reversed the order (example: Gal. 1:1). This indicates that Paul regarded the Father and the Son as essentially one God.

Paul reminded his readers of what God had done for them: He "loved" and He "gave" (II Thess. 2:16). When speaking of the love of God for Christians, Paul may have had in mind the sacrifice of Christ for sinners. Surely no greater evidence of God's love could be imagined.

What God gave the Thessalonians was "eternal encouragement and good hope." Probably "eternal encouragement" refers to the effects of salvation. Because the Thessalonians had been saved, they



# 'Encouragement'

The Greek term translated "encouragement" in II Thessalonians 2:16 is *paraklesin* [par-AHK-lay-sin]. It literally means "a calling to one's side." In other words, one person is called to the side of another to exhort or to encourage. A form of this word is used as a title for the Holy Spirit (John 14:26).

*Paraklesin* refers to encouragement that prepares for action. So when Paul said that God "gave us eternal encouragement" (II Thess. 2:16), he was talking about a continuing process of divine strengthening, exhortation, and aid. It would be natural to see the Holy Spirit's involvement in this process.

had received a permanent change of attitude. Probably the "good hope" was the Thessalonians' hope for future blessings. They had reason to expect kindnesses from the Lord at His second coming.

But God's loving believers and giving us encouragement and hope is just the historical background to Paul's specific prayer request for the Thessalonians. He wanted God to encourage their hearts and strengthen them in their good works (vs. 17). These are the things he thought they needed most, given their situation.

Because of persecution and the false teaching in Thessalonica, and perhaps for other reasons too, Paul's readers needed encouragement. God could give them the spiritual uplift they required. He could refresh

their hearts and give them the grit they needed to go on believing and obeying the truth.

The Thessalonian believers were already involved in serving others in deed and in word. But as Christians soon find out, ministry can be wearying. So Paul prayed for an injection of new energy into the Thessalonians as they carried on in their lives of service.

When we find ourselves feeling discouraged and weak, we should not forget that God is able to supply us with what we need to get moving again. His resources are more than abundant enough to meet our needs, and He is eager for us to apply to Him for help.

*Ask Yourself . . . In what areas of my life do I need divine encouragement? In what areas do I need divine strength?*



## A Request for Intercession (3:1, 2)

**Brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith.** —II Thessalonians 3:1, 2

Paul, having prayed for the Thessalonians, was not too proud or too vain to ask prayer for himself. He requested prayer for the success of his mission and for personal protection.

Paul's first prayer request was that "the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you" (vs. 1). This, of course, was a reference to his own preaching ministry. At the time Paul wrote this letter, he was probably in Corinth. So he was thinking especially about the future of Christianity in that major city and in the surrounding territory of Achaia.

Paul seems to have operated with a sense of urgency. People were dying every day without Christ. The Lord's return might happen soon. So Paul felt anxious to spread the Gospel as fast and as well as possible. He was glad for a few converts, but he prayed for many.

The message of the Lord would be honored as people came to believe in it. Many other religions and philosophies were being peddled at that time. But the Gospel deserved

to be recognized as the only complete truth about how people can find peace with God. That's what had happened in Thessalonica, and it could happen in Corinth and elsewhere.

In some Christian circles today, evangelism is not much emphasized. But if the Gospel is the message of eternal life that we claim it is, then we should be eager to see it spread rapidly and effectively. Of course, we should not seek to make our churches grow for reasons of pride or vanity. But we should seek to reach people for Jesus, incorporating them into a church, for their own good and for the glory of God.

*Ask Yourself . . . How am I contributing to the spread of the Lord's message?*

Paul's second prayer request was for deliverance "from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith" (vs. 2). The apostle was doing spiritual battle in Corinth with people who opposed what he was preaching (Acts 18:6, 12-17). Therefore, the prayer support of fellow believers was essential. The Thessalonians knew how Paul had been abused in their own city by bigoted, wicked men (17:5-9). His wish for deliverance from enemies of the Gospel in other places, then, was something they could understand.

The reason Paul gave for the opposition he faced is that "not everyone has faith" (II Thess. 3:2b). Now, there's an understatement. The preaching of the Gospel always

meets with resistance as well as acceptance, and sometimes the resistance can be stiff indeed.

All Christians can be involved in the kind of prayer ministry Paul urged on his readers. Persistent prayer is needed for pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and Christian workers of all kinds so the Gospel will be preached and accepted. Opposition to the Gospel remains strong in many places, sometimes for political as well as religious reasons.

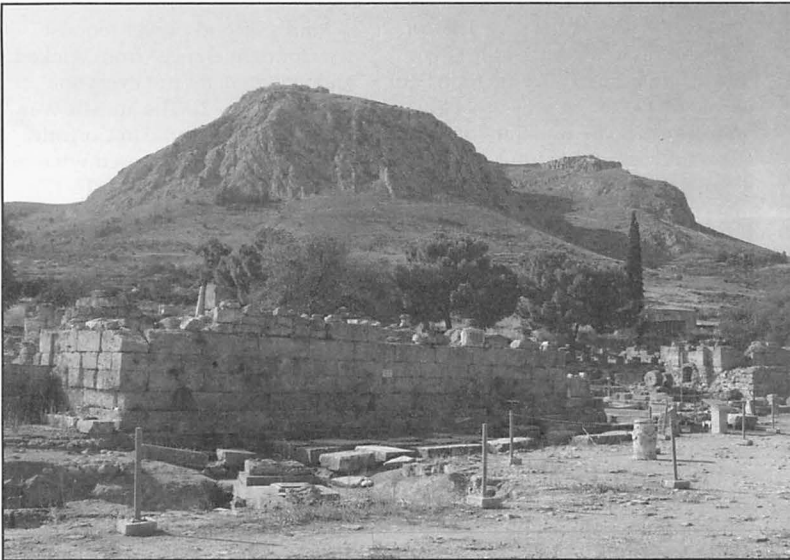
*Ask Yourself . . . What Christian workers can I pray for today?*

## **d** Protection and Perseverance (3:3-5)

**The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. —II Thessalonians 3:3**

Persecution was something that Paul and the Thessalonians had in common. He was suffering from the actions of “wicked and evil men” (vs. 2), and so were they. So Paul assured them again of God’s ability to take care of them.

*Paul, writing from Corinth, asked the Thessalonians to pray that he would be delivered from evil people (II Thess. 3:2). Below is the bema, or ceremonial speaker’s platform, in Corinth. This may have been the place where an unsuccessful case was brought against Paul by unbelievers (Acts 18:12-17).*



That "the Lord is faithful" (vs. 3) means He can be depended upon completely by all who believe in Him. The Thessalonians could depend on Him to give them strength and protection against Satan himself, "the evil one."

"The evil one" is a common New Testament term for Satan. Satan's eventual destruction is certain, but in the present, he is active. However, Christians can be sure that God will strengthen us in our continuing battle with this powerful and wicked opponent.

The word translated "protect" means "guard." Paul made the point that God does not establish His people and then leave us on our own; He guards us continually.

*Ask Yourself . . . When have I felt God's protection in the middle of a temptation or crisis?*

Because God would be faithful to the Thessalonians, Paul had "confidence in the Lord" (vs. 4) that they were obeying and would continue to obey his teachings. Evidently, then, Paul associated his commands with effective opposition to the evil one. By believing and living as Paul taught, the Thessalonians could frustrate the plans of Satan.

Paul's confidence must have given much-needed encouragement to the Thessalonians. Reading about this confidence, the Thessalonians would be inspired to trust God afresh to enable them to do His will as it was communicated through the apostle.

## Satan's Names

**B**iblical names for the arch-demon reveal his evil character.

In the Old Testament, he is called "Satan," meaning "the adversary." In the New Testament, the "evil one" (II Thess. 3:3) is also called:

- "Beelzebub" [be-EL-zee-bubb], meaning "lord of flies" (Matt. 12:24);
- "a murderer from the beginning . . . a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44);
- "the prince of this world" (John 12:31);
- "the god of this age" (II Cor. 4:4);
- "Belial" [BEE-lih-al], meaning "the wicked one" (6:15);
- "the tempter" (I Thess. 3:5);
- the "enemy" (I Pet. 5:8);
- "Abaddon" [ah-BAD-un] and "Apollyon" [ah-PAHL-yuhn], both meaning "the destroyer" (Rev. 9:11);
- "the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan" (12:9); and
- "the accuser of our brothers" (vs. 10).

At the same time, Paul knew how easy it is for believers to go astray and to cave in to fear of the enemy. So he prayed that the Thessalonians would allow themselves to be directed into God's love and Christ's steadfastness. The word used for "direct" (vs. 5) also means "guide" and "lead." It was sometimes used of guiding a storm-tossed ship into a peaceful harbor.

As Christians, we too need to

be directed into an ever deeper understanding of God's love—to rest and rejoice in it. We also need to reflect more and more on the patient suffering of Christ (vs. 5). He endured the cross with joy (Heb. 12:2), and He is our example in times of testing and persecution.

*Ask Yourself . . . How might the Lord wish to direct my heart into God's love and Christ's perseverance?*



# 11

## Idleness as Irresponsibility

### II Thessalonians 3:6-18

#### **a** The Rule of Self-support (3:6-10)

Even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

—II Thessalonians 3:10

Coming to the end of his second letter to the Thessalonian believers, Paul addressed a serious problem that had developed among them: some of the Thessalonians had decided not to work anymore. We can't be sure why. According to one suggestion, the idlers had decided that since Christ was returning soon, there was no point in working. Another possibility is that the idlers thought their fellow church members should support them while they devoted themselves to prayer and study.

Whatever the reason for the idleness in the Thessalonian church, Paul didn't like it. And apparently Paul thought the disease of idleness might be contagious. He commanded the working members of the church to stay away from the idlers (vs. 6).

The idle Thessalonians should have known better than to refrain from working. In fact, they had deliberately chosen to disobey what Paul had taught about work when he was with them in person (see vs. 10) and when he had written his first letter (see I Thess. 4:11, 12; 5:14). Therefore, they deserved to be shunned by the more obedient church members.

Paul did not ask the Thessalonians to avoid the idlers but commanded them to do so. Issuing his order "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (II Thess. 3:6) made it especially authoritative. The word translated "command" was used to describe generals giving orders to their troops. The word for "idle" referred to soldiers who were lax in discipline.

Despite his insistence, Paul did not bully his readers. He addressed the troubled Thessalonians as "brothers." This included those who had fallen into idleness as well as those who had not.

To reinforce his command, Paul reminded the Thessalonians how he had lived at Thessalonica (vss. 7-10). Paul had set the example. He had



worked hard and he had not accepted a meal without paying for it with the money he had earned.

By saying he had worked and paid his own way, Paul did not mean that the Thessalonian Christians had not shown him hospitality. Presumably, they had offered to feed him and take care of his other material needs. But the apostle refused to be a financial burden. He wanted to become a positive role model for others.

Surely Paul knew the importance of his apostolic ministry. If he had not worked for a living, he would have had more time to spread the Gospel and to teach new believers. But the fact that he “worked night and day, laboring and toiling” (vs. 8) showed the great importance he put on offering an example of hard work. He had to carry out his spiritual ministry after hours of physical labor.

While Paul said he had been determined to work hard in Thessalonica, he affirmed that he had a right to receive material help



*When Paul was in Thessalonica, he “worked night and day, laboring and toiling” (II Thess. 3:8). From other New Testament passages we know that Paul’s craft was tentmaking. While in Thessalonica he may have made tents similar to the bedouin tent pictured above.*

from the Thessalonians while he was ministering among them (vs. 9). He had not had to work. But he deliberately gave up his right for the good of the Thessalonians—to become a model for them to follow. This was evidently Paul’s practice in more than one city (see I Cor. 9:1-23).

Clearly, people who devote themselves full time to serving churches deserve to be paid by those they minister to. There may still be occasions when Christian workers will find it helpful to pay their own way, such as when planting a new church. But that should be their decision. Church members should consider it their duty to see

that those who serve the church in Christ's name are offered adequate compensation so that they can devote themselves fully to their work.

*Ask Yourself . . . How do I feel about the level of financial support those who minister to me receive? Is it too much, too little, or just about right?*

When Paul had been in Thessalonica, he had noticed that idlers and gossips were infecting the church. So he had commanded that anyone who didn't work should not eat. "We gave you this rule" (II Thess. 3:10) has the flavor of a "command" (vss. 4, 6). "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (vs. 10) was a consistent theme of Paul's teaching, not a shoot-from-the-hip remark. He meant that idle Christians should not be permitted to sponge off the hardworking Christians.

Paul had in mind voluntary choice—"will not work," (emphasis added). He was not referring to a person who loses his or her job for economic or political reasons, or is unable to work. The Christians of Thessalonica naturally needed to care for their poor and their unemployed. But a person who refused to work had no right to such consideration.

*Ask Yourself . . . What can I do to help fellow Christians who are unable to get work and are consequently suffering financially?*



## **A Command to Work (3:11-13)**

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.

—II Thessalonians 3:11, 12

When it came to idleness, Paul had some specific individuals in mind. He said, "We hear that some among you are idle" (vs. 11). Perhaps someone had written to him about the serious epidemic of idleness, but more likely the reports had come from visitors.

The reports told of idleness when it came to work but of busyness when it came to gossip. Paul wrote, "They are not busy; they are busybodies." Since the idlers weren't working, they had plenty of time to swap tales about other people and stick their noses in where they didn't belong.

It's still the case that idlers can become busybodies. If we have too much leisure time, we often get involved in disreputable activities. The devil finds work for idle hands to do. That's one more reason for making a habit of working hard.

*Ask Yourself . . . Is idleness a cause of any of my usual sins?*

Now Paul spoke directly to the people who were not working (vs. 12). However, he did not address

them by name. He said, "Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat" (emphasis added).

While Paul addressed the loafers tactfully, he did not mince words. He claimed the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ for his command. If the loafers recognized Christ as their Lord, then they ought to have obeyed Paul's orders.

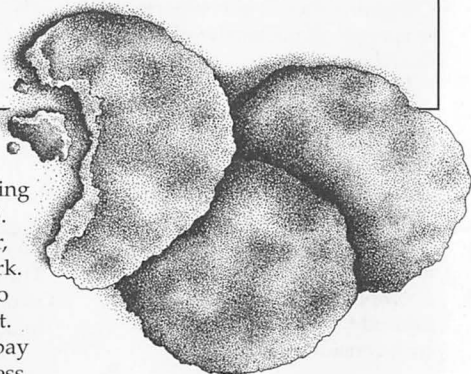
Paul wanted the idlers to "settle down and earn the bread they eat." Instead of being "busybodies" (vs. 11), they were to get back to work. No more sponging off others. They were to work for a living just like anybody else.

By saying "and as for you" (vs. 13), Paul stopped addressing the idlers and turned his attention back to those who were working. He told the working Thessalonians, "Never tire of doing what is right" (compare Gal. 6:9). He probably meant, in particular, doing right by continuing to work. But his advice is broad enough to take in other kinds of doing right.

Perhaps the offenders would pay no attention to Paul, but regardless, the workers were not to follow their example and stop working. It can be hard to keep on the straight and narrow road when other travelers are veering off and taking one exit

## **Bread**

**B**read, usually made from wheat or barley, was a staple of the diet of peoples in the ancient Near East. As the universal food, "bread" was often used figuratively to mean food in general. This was Paul's intention in II Thessalonians 3:12. When he wrote that the idlers of Thessalonica were to "earn the bread they eat," he was referring to their entire diet. People in the first-century Mediterranean world ate (in addition to bread) such foods as meat, fish, rice, cucumbers, eggs, honey, olives, figs, grapes, beans, lentils, melons, and onions.



ramp after another. Nevertheless, Paul urged the Thessalonian believers to keep on doing what was

right—in regard to work and other areas of their lives.

For many Christians today, idleness is not one of their failings. On the contrary, they work too hard. They are workaholics, devoting themselves to their jobs so extensively that their family, their church, and even their own health may suffer for it.

Others, however, still need to heed Paul's warning against idleness. They work too little, depend on the goodness of others too much, and waste time in harmful behaviors. By acting in this way, they are doing what is wrong in God's sight.

We should try to strike a healthy balance between overwork and idleness.

*Ask Yourself . . . Do I tend to work too much? Or do I look for ways to avoid working? How can I achieve the right balance for me?*

warning concerning those who would disobey his teachings. The word translated "obey" (vs. 14) means not only hearing but also acting on what is heard.

Paul's readers were told to be on the lookout for—"take special note of"—those who would choose to disregard the apostle's commands. The idlers were to be avoided (compare vs. 6). "Do not associate with him" (vs. 14) means, more literally, "Do not mix yourselves up with him."

The goal of this avoidance was to bring the idlers to the point of feeling shame for their idleness, so that they would change their behavior. The phrase "in order that he may feel ashamed" (vs. 14) suggests the role of peer pressure in helping to bring the disobedient into line with God's will. Paul's hope was that the pain of being avoided would effectively inspire the idlers to see the error of their ways.

*Ask Yourself . . . How do I feel about some church members avoiding others for disciplinary reasons?*

The entire effort was to be carried out in a spirit of Christian love. Those who refused to obey Paul were still brothers in Christ, not enemies (vs. 15). This means that Paul was not ordering outright excommunication of the idlers. He only wanted them to be shamed by being avoided. Possibly Paul feared that some of the more zealous church members would take drastic action against the idlers. Paul's goal

---

## **C** Discipline of Idlers (3:14, 15)

**If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed.**

—II Thessalonians 3:14

The seriousness with which Paul viewed the situation in the Thessalonica church stands out in these verses. He gave a special

# Church Discipline

**T**he New Testament teaches that churches have the right and the responsibility to discipline members who persist in sinning.

As Jesus outlined it, church discipline is a process involving patience, careful examination, and mounting pressure upon the sinners. Sinners are to be given every opportunity to repent, and only if they steadfastly refuse to repent, are they to be expelled from the church (Matt. 18:15-17).

Other New Testament passages fill out the picture of church discipline. The purpose of church discipline is not to punish the sinner but to lead him or her to repent and reform (II Thess. 3:14). Discipline also helps to prevent sin from spreading within the church (Rev. 2:20). In cases falling short of excommunication, the one being disciplined should still be treated as a brother or sister in Christ (II Thess. 3:15). Once a sinner has repented, he or she should be forgiven and comforted (II Cor. 2:5-7). Those carrying out church discipline should look out for their own purity (Gal. 6:1; Jude 22, 23).

Those who stubbornly refuse to repent can be put out of the church. Sins calling for excommunication may be either moral (I Cor. 5) or doctrinal (I Tim. 1:20; Rev. 2:2, 20). A sinner should receive ample warning before being excommunicated (Titus 3:10). Excommunication means putting the sinner into the realm of Satan (I Cor. 5:5; I Tim. 1:20). But excommunication is not necessarily a permanent state; it may—and hopefully will—lead the sinner to repent (I Tim. 1:20).

was their restoration to usefulness in the community of faith, not their punishment.

Many churches today have no program for disciplining believers. In those cases, the churches ought to take a close look at what the Bible has to say about disciplining church members who persist in sin.

But among those churches that do practice church discipline, they need to be careful to use appropriate measures. The purpose of discipline is never to harm the sinner. Therefore, the lightest pressure that is still effective should be used. Believers who are temporarily in a state of stubborn sinfulness are still our brothers and sisters in Christ.

*Ask Yourself . . . What should be my role in helping my church effectively discipline and restore church members?*

## **d** Benediction (3:16-18)

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. —II Thessalonians 3:16

Warning and blessing need to be kept in balance. Paul prayed that his readers—all of them—would enjoy Christ's peace and presence. Paul usually spoke of the "God of peace," but he generally meant Christ when he said "the Lord" (vs. 16).

Perhaps upset by misunderstandings about Christ's return and about meeting social needs, the Thessalonian believers needed to find peace "at all times and in every way." The phrase "at all times" shows that

Paul wanted them to know constant, unbroken peace. The phrase "in every way" shows that God's peace would be with them in all their different circumstances.

Paul's prayer "The Lord be with all of you" suggests that peace depends on Christ's presence. It cannot be achieved any other way. Christ abides in His own and will never forsake us.

*Ask Yourself . . . Do I experience the peace that comes from Christ's presence in my life?*

At the end of his letter Paul penned a personal greeting (vs. 17). When writing letters, he usually dictated his thoughts to a scribe and then added a few words in his own distinctive handwriting. "The distinguishing mark" was the sign

## **The Biblical Meaning of 'PEACE'**

**W**e usually think of peace as the absence of war. But the biblical words for "peace"—*shalom* [shah-LOAM] in the Old Testament and *eirene* [eye-RAY-nay] in the New Testament—have a much broader meaning. In the Bible, peace is concerned with wholeness, soundness, and spiritual health. So when Paul prayed that the Lord would give the Thessalonians "peace" (II Thess. 3:16), he was desiring that they would flourish in their spiritual lives especially, but in other ways as well.



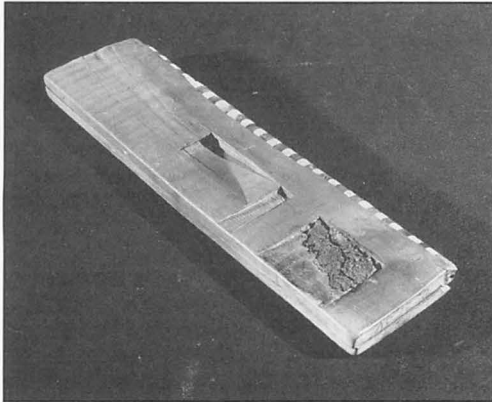
that the letter was truly his and not a forgery (compare 2:2). It was important for the church to know that this letter was authentic.

Paul's traditional farewell (3:18) extended the blessing of Christ to everyone in the church, even those he had rebuked. He wrote, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."

Paul's prescription for a healthy

Christian community included accepting responsibility, keeping on doing right, confronting brothers, and living in God's peace. Such practical guidelines can help strengthen congregations today.

*Ask Yourself . . . Which of the teachings in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians do my church and I need most?*



*Paul typically wrote only the last few lines of his letters personally. This wooden pen case dates from about Paul's era.*

# The Letter of Jude

---

**T**he Letter of Jude is short but powerful. It burns with righteous anger against people who were disobeying God's will and encouraging others to do the same. It also issues a call for the Lord's people to fight for the true faith in confidence that one day God will establish full justice.

Our age, like Jude's, is one in which people are tempted to dilute or abandon God's everlasting Word. If we have grown content to put up with doctrinal error, then the Letter of Jude can stir up our zeal to defend the biblical faith against all attackers.

---

## Author

The writer of this letter called himself "Jude" (vs. 1). Jude, or Judas, was a common name in New Testament times. We can't be certain whether the writer was one of the Judases mentioned in the New Testament, or if so, which one. But we can make an informed guess.

Beyond his name, the writer identified himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James." The use of the word "servant," instead of "apostle," suggests that we can rule out the faithful apostle named Judas.

The name James, like Judas, was a common one. In this case it may refer to the most prominent James of the apostolic period: the half brother of Jesus named James, a leader of the Jerusalem church.

Jesus had four half brothers: James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Matt. 13:55). After initial doubting (John 7:5), the brothers became believers (Acts 1:14). More than one of them became traveling preachers (I Cor. 9:5). Judas may have written the Letter of Jude.

---

## Date, Place, and Occasion of Composition

Nothing in the Letter of Jude establishes beyond a doubt when it was written. In general terms, however, the command "remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold" (vs. 17) places the letter within the apostolic period (about A.D. 30-100).

Furthermore, Bible scholars have

noted that parts of the letter bear a marked resemblance to parts of

II Peter, which is thought to have been written sometime between A.D. 65 and A.D. 68. If Jude drew on II Peter as a source, then he may have written his letter anytime between A.D. 65 and about A.D. 80. But if Peter drew on the Letter of

Jude, then Jude must have written his letter by A.D. 68.

We have even fewer clues about where the letter was written than about when it was written. Jude's

home was in Palestine, but he may have done considerable traveling. He could have written the letter from just about anywhere within the Roman Empire.

## Recipients of the Letter

Jude wrote to "those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ" (vs. 1). In simple terms, he wrote to Christians. But it's no longer known which Christians he wrote to.

At the time Jude wrote, Christian churches were flourishing throughout the Roman Empire. Some Bible scholars have suggested that Jude's frequent use of the Old Testament and other Jewish writings indicates that his earliest readers were Jewish Christians living in Palestine. That was not

necessarily the case, however, since many Jewish Christians lived outside Palestine. Besides, many Gentile converts to Christianity were familiar with Jewish literature. Perhaps, then, Jude wrote to one or more of the partly Jewish/ partly Gentile congregations somewhere beyond the borders of Palestine.

It stands to reason that Jude's first readers were believers he had met during his missionary journeys. The letter gives no indication, however, that Jude had founded the church or churches to which he wrote.

## Occasion and Purpose for Writing

The Letter of Jude that we find in our Bible isn't the letter that Jude originally intended to write. He had wanted to write "about the salvation we share" (vs. 3). But before he could write that letter, he evidently heard some news about his intended readers that disturbed him. Some people calling themselves Christian teachers had come to the church or churches to whom Jude wrote, and these people were spreading false teaching. So, as Jude said, "I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints."

Judging by the Letter of Jude, the false teachers were (among other

things) practicing sexual immorality, rebelling against authority, and causing divisions. Such characteristics have led many Bible scholars to suspect that the false teachers were promoting an early form of the religious philosophy that eventually came to be called Gnosticism [NOSS-tih-SIZ-uhm]. Gnostics believed that they were enlightened ones, having gotten "knowledge" (in Greek, *gnosis*).

In the centuries after Jude wrote, Gnosticism was one of the Christian church's most dangerous foes. So if the false teachers about whom Jude warned were early Gnostics, then Jude was wise to be concerned.

# 12

## Contending for the Faith

**Jude 1-10**

### **a** Jude's Reason for Writing (vss. 1-4)

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. —Jude 3

The next to last book of the Bible was written by a man named Jude. As the introduction (pp. 95-96) states, Jude probably was a half brother of Jesus. If this identification is correct, then perhaps it was Jude's humility that kept him from identifying himself as the Lord's brother. Instead, he called himself a "servant" of Jesus Christ (vs. 1). Jesus' half brother James used the same designation for himself (see Jas. 1:1).

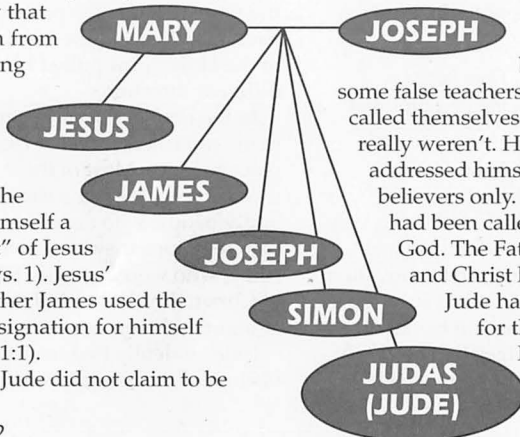
While Jude did not claim to be

Jesus' brother, he did claim to be the brother of a man named James. If Jude was the half brother of Jesus, then this James was the well-known leader of the Jerusalem church and the writer of the biblical book that bears his name. James was martyred in A.D. 62. It's not known whether he was still alive at the time Jude wrote this letter.

Jude addressed his letter to "those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ" (Jude 1). Without more to go on than this, it's impossible to say precisely who the initial recipients of the letter were. We don't even know whether the letter was sent to one church or to more than one church.

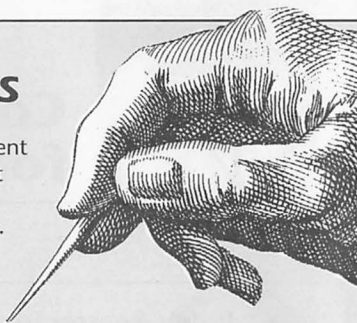
Jude's readers had been joined by some false teachers—people who called themselves Christians but really weren't. However, Jude addressed himself to the true believers only. He said they had been called to faith by God. The Father loved them and Christ kept them.

Jude had three desires for these people. He wanted them to



## Ancient Letters

Letters in the first century A.D. were different in many ways from those in our day. Ancient letters might be written on waxed wooden tablets, papyrus, parchment, clay, or pottery. Frequently, the sender would dictate to a scribe, sometimes a professional, who in certain cases had freedom to shape the expression of the sender's ideas. Once finished, the letter would generally be delivered by a private courier, who might verify or expand verbally upon the letter's contents.



Ancient letters generally had a three-part form: opening, body, and closing. The opening often would include the name and title of the sender, the name and title of the recipient, and a greeting in the form of a blessing or a wish for the recipient's welfare. The closing might include final greetings, a mention of the scribe, the date, and the signature of the sender.

experience God's mercy, peace, and love—and not just in small measure but “in abundance” (vs. 2). These blessings could be theirs if they remained obedient to the Lord.

*Ask Yourself . . . How have I experienced God's mercy, peace, and love recently?*

For a while Jude had been meaning to write to his initial readers. But at first he'd had a very different letter in mind. He had been eager to write about salvation. Perhaps he had in mind such topics as Christ's sacrifice on behalf of sinners, the changes that ought to occur in the lives of people who

have been saved, and the second coming of Christ.

Jude may eventually have written the letter he had planned. But at the time he wrote the present letter, circumstances and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit pulled him in a different direction.

In the time of the early church, many preachers traveled from place to place. Most of these itinerant preachers, no doubt, were godly people who benefited the congregations they visited. But some, who were not truly followers of Christ, drew others off the straight and narrow path.

Jude evidently had heard that visitors of the ungodly sort had

appeared among his readers. So he changed his plans. Instead of writing about salvation, Jude wrote to warn and instruct his readers. He could not at that time go in person to contend for the faith against the false teachers, but he urged his readers to do so.

According to Jude, the true faith is that which “was once for all entrusted to the saints” (vs. 3). The false teachers were promoting a new religious philosophy. The true faith, on the other hand, is unchanging. Jude’s readers were to hold fast to the Gospel they had learned from the apostles and other godly teachers, probably including Jude himself.

Attacks on the Christian faith—both by people who call themselves Christians and by others—are still common. Each generation of believers must be willing to arm for battle and defend the faith. Only in that way will the Good News continue as a powerful force in the world.

*Ask Yourself . . . How might I someday have to contend for the faith?*

After urging his readers to contend for the faith, Jude told them who they would have to contend against: the false teachers in their midst. Jude probably knew these men by name; he may even have met them personally. But in this letter he merely called them “certain men” (vs. 4).

These men had “secretly slipped in among” Jude’s readers. In other words, they had at first found

acceptance among the Christians. Only later had doubts arisen in some people’s minds.

Jude said of the false teachers that their “condemnation was written about long ago.” Jude’s meaning here is not perfectly clear. He may have been referring generally to Old Testament promises that the wicked will be judged. Or he may have been thinking of the quote from the nonbiblical Book of Enoch that we find in Jude 14 and 15. A comparison of Jude 4 with II Peter 2:3 suggests that Jude may have meant that personal condemnation had long been hanging over the heads of the false teachers.

Calling the false teachers “godless men” (Jude 4), Jude leveled two charges against them. First, the false teachers had changed God’s grace into a license for immorality. Second, they had denied Jesus Christ, the believer’s Sovereign and Lord.

As for the first charge, the false teachers apparently taught that salvation by God’s grace lifts believers above moral restraints. The teachers believed that moral laws did not apply to them. Therefore, they could indulge in any sensual pleasures they chose. This belief is called *antinomianism* [ANT-ih-NO-mee-uh-NIZ-uhm], meaning lawlessness.

If the false teachers believed in an early form of the religious philosophy called Gnosticism [NOSS-tih-SIZ-uhm], as some people believe, that would help explain the teachers’ acceptance of immorality. According to Gnostics



# JESUS IS LORD

The confession "Jesus is Lord" was the earliest Christian creed (see Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11). But it could be a dangerous confession to make publicly. In certain periods the Roman emperor required everyone to confess that he was divine. Christians sometimes suffered greatly for insisting, on the contrary, that Jesus is Lord.

[NOSS-ticks], matter is evil. This belief led some Gnostics to practice asceticism (self-denial) as a rejection of the material world. But other Gnostics took the line that those who are spiritual can indulge themselves sensually without its affecting them in any way. The false teachers may have been of this second sort.

Jude's second charge against the false teachers was that they denied Christ. This perhaps means that by deliberately violating Christian ethical standards, the false teachers were in effect denying Christ. Or perhaps, if the false teachers were early Gnostics, they denied Christ by promoting a distorted doctrine of Christ's nature.

Whatever interpretation is correct, we can see that the false teachers posed a serious threat to the spiritual health of Jude's readers.



## Examples of Judgment (vss. 5-7)

**Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe.**

—Jude 5

Jude had much more to say about the false teachers in his readers' midst. In this portion of the letter, Jude compared the false teachers to three groups of sinful persons from the past: (1) the unbelieving Israelites of the Exodus generation, (2) wicked angels, and (3) the sinful inhabitants of the Plain of the Jordan. Each of these groups was judged by God, as the false teachers would be.

Some people in our day don't believe in the reality of judgment. They think the idea of God's judging people is inconsistent with a belief in His loving nature. But Jude's examples show that judgment has always been God's way of dealing with people who stubbornly reject His will.

*Ask Yourself . . . How should the reality of divine judgment affect the way I live my life?*

Before bringing up the examples of judgment, Jude said, "You already know all this" and "I want to remind you" (vs. 5). Jude's readers were familiar with the Old Testament and other Jewish writings. But he wanted to refresh their memories and make

pointed comparisons. In later parts of the letter, Jude followed the same strategy.

For his first example of judgment, Jude wrote, "The Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe." The latter part of this sentence refers to a story told in Numbers 13—14.

Long before Jude's time, the Lord rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites crossed the Sinai peninsula to a point near the promised land. Then Moses sent out 12 men to explore the promised land of Canaan.

Afterward, the spies reported that Canaan was a rich land well worth having. But the majority of the spies advised against an attempt at conquest because the people who lived there were strong. Hearing this, the Israelites became afraid and

would not believe that God would deliver the Canaanites into their hands.

For this unbelief, God sentenced the whole nation to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. During that time virtually the whole of a generation died.

Like the Exodus generation of Israelites, the false teachers in Jude's time did not have faith. And like the Israelites, the teachers would be judged.

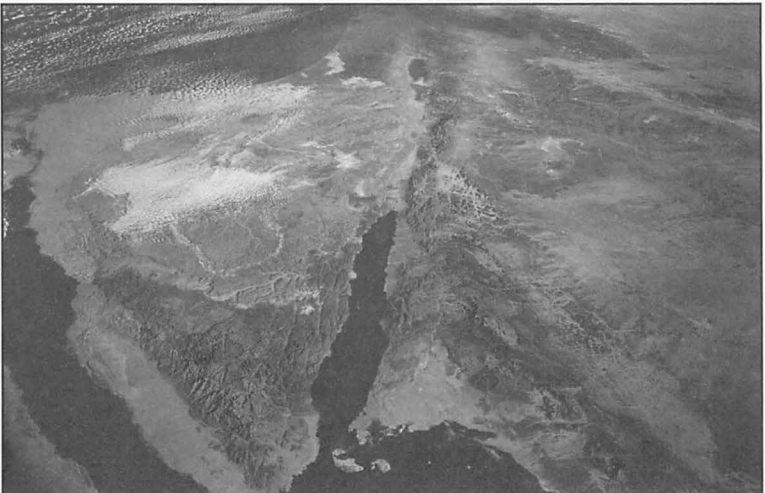
Jude's second example of judgment went like this: "The angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these [God] has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day" (Jude 6).

Two interpretations of this verse are common.

The first interpretation links Jude's words with Genesis 6:1-4, a

---

*A generation of Israelites died in the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula because they would not trust God.*



passage in which the “sons of God” are said to have married the “daughters of men.” According to this interpretation, the “sons of God” were angels whose lust led to their punishment.

Another interpretation holds that Jude 6 refers to the fall of Satan and his demons. This fall is hinted at in Scripture but is nowhere described at length. According to this interpretation, the wicked angels rebelled against God and thus were punished.

If the first interpretation is correct, Jude presumably offered this example to show that just as the angels had formed unnatural marriages, the false teachers were committing sexual immorality. If the second interpretation is correct, then Jude presumably was making the point that just as the angels had rebelled against God’s authority, the false teachers were rejecting God’s authority as well as proper church authorities. Either way, the false teachers, like the angels, would be judged.

Regardless of which interpretation one prefers to explain the angels’ abandoning their home, one is still left with another question: In what sense are evil angels kept in darkness and bound with chains? The Bible clearly describes demons as active in human affairs; they must, therefore, have some freedom. Perhaps the binding refers to divine limitations upon their authority and their freedom. Or maybe the binding involves only some demons.

As his third example of judgment, Jude wrote, “Sodom and Gomorrah

and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion” (vs. 7). This story is told in Genesis 18:16—19:29.

In Abraham’s time, the five cities in the Plain of the Jordan were filled with sinful people. The men of Sodom, for example, were violent homosexuals. Not even ten righteous people could be found in Sodom, so God destroyed the cities of the plain (with one exception).

Like the people from the cities of the plain, the false teachers were sexually immoral. Destroyed by burning sulfur from the sky, the people from the cities of the plain “serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). Jude saw the false teachers as being in line for just such punishment.

## **C Charges against the False Teachers (vss. 8-10)**

**These men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals—these are the very things that destroy them. —Jude 10**

After offering three examples of wicked persons who were judged, Jude declared, “In the very same way, these dreamers pollute their own bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings” (vs. 8). Perhaps he was here referring,

specifically, to the last of the three examples. The Sodomites polluted their bodies through the practice of homosexuality; they rejected the authority of God as well as the authority of Lot, who was a leader of Sodom; and they abused angels who visited their town shortly before the judgment.

By calling the false teachers "dreamers," Jude may have been referring to claims they made to receive revelations through dreams and visions. Or perhaps he was suggesting that their ideas were dreams, not reality.

These dreamers polluted their own bodies by committing sexual immorality. Perhaps, like the Sodomites, they engaged in homosexual behavior. Perhaps they went to religious prostitutes. Perhaps they committed adultery or fornication.

The false teachers also rejected authority. They would not obey God's laws, and they probably opposed church leaders as well.

In addition, the false teachers slandered celestial beings. Numerous interpretations have been offered to explain why the false teachers slandered angels. Perhaps the teachers thought themselves superior to angels, and said so. Or perhaps they slandered the angels for the part angels

played in delivering the law of Moses (Gal. 3:19), which the teachers disliked obeying.

The theory that the false teachers were early Gnostics offers another

## Gnosticism

One of the most influential bodies of philosophy in the early centuries of the Christian era was called Gnosticism. The name comes from the Greek word for knowledge: *gnosis* [KNOW-siss]. Gnostics considered themselves enlightened.

Combining Christianity with ideas from pagan sources, Gnosticism had many versions. But here are some beliefs that generally characterized

### GNOSTICISM:

Spirit and matter are essentially separate; spirit is good, while matter is evil.

One or more inferior beings, rather than God, created the world.

An inferior being, rather than God, is responsible for the Old Testament.

God has no personality.

Humans have no free will.

Christ was not fully human and His earthly life was unreal.

explanation for why they slandered angels. Gnostics taught that the world, which is evil because it is material, was created by angels, not by God. They believed, then, that angels were enemies of God and of spiritual people. Gnostics would revile angels to demonstrate their victory over them and over the "evil" material world.

To illustrate the danger of slander-ing celestial beings, Jude referred to a case in which even Satan—leader of the demons—received some respect because of his angelic nature. While disputing with Satan over the body of Moses, the archangel Michael refrained from rebuking Satan, leaving that up to God.

Verse 9 is thought to refer to a story in *The Assumption of Moses*, a Jewish writing that no longer exists. The Old Testament does not record Michael's dispute with Satan over the body of Moses.

This is one of several New Testament quotations from non-biblical sources. Jude's quotation does not imply that *The Assumption of Moses* is divinely inspired. But because Jude was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the part that he quoted must have been true.

The false teachers, out of their great pride, were not as cautious about angels as Michael was. Without really understanding angels, they took it upon themselves to slander those spiritual beings.

While the false teachers didn't know much about angels, Jude said, they did understand some things by instinct. Clearly, Jude was here referring to sex. Even unreasoning animals know enough to satisfy their sexual drives. Like animals, the false teachers were indulging themselves sexually, and their immorality was destroying them.

If the false teachers were Gnostics, they prided themselves on their knowledge. But Jude declared that their understanding was flawed and that they acted in an unreasoning way.

Like the false teachers, we too may be tempted to spiritual or intellectual pride. Of course, we are right to pursue spiritual truth with all our strength. But we should be careful not to think we know more than we really do. A little humility is advisable for everyone.

*Ask Yourself . . . In what areas of my life am I most vulnerable to spiritual pride?*

# 13

## Kept by the Power of God

**Jude 11-25**

### **a** Characterizations of the False Teachers (vss. 11-13)

**Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion. —Jude 11**

We learned in Lesson 12 that Jude took a dim view of some false teachers who were trying to lead Christians astray. He charged them with (among other things) slandering angels and acting according to their base instincts.

Now Jude's wrath was aroused, and he cried, "Woe to them!" (vs. 11). The cry of woe was a typical prophetic warning of divine judgment on sinners. Sooner or later, the false teachers would get their just deserts.

Making brief comparisons between the false teachers and three Old Testament villains, Jude strengthened the case for the teachers' deserving God's judgment. "They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into

Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion."

The way of Cain was the way of faithlessness, envy, and violence. Cain, the oldest son of Adam and Eve, offered a sacrifice that was unacceptable to God. Then, out of jealousy, Cain killed his younger brother Abel, who had offered a sacrifice acceptable to God (Gen. 4:1-8).

This first comparison shows that the false teachers of Jude's day were unacceptable to God and presented a threat to those who were acceptable to Him.

Balaam's error was the error of being greedy and tempting others to ungodliness. Balaam was a pagan soothsayer in the time of Moses who was offered money by Israel's enemies to curse the Israelites. Balaam was prevented by the Lord from cursing the Israelites (Num. 22—24), but he advised tempting the Israelites to engage in sexual immorality and pagan worship (31:16; see chap. 25).

This second comparison suggests that the false teachers in Jude's day were trying to make a profit while leading people astray morally and spiritually.

Korah's rebellion was an act



of defiance against established leadership. During the Israelites' wilderness wandering period, a Levite named Korah led a short-lived rebellion against Moses and Aaron, leaders of the Israelites. Korah and his followers were destroyed when the ground opened up and swallowed them (16:1-40).

This third comparison indicates that the false teachers in Jude's day would not submit to the established authorities in the church (or churches) they were visiting. Perhaps it also indicates their way of rejecting the authority of God.

*Ask Yourself . . . Have I ever done anything like taken the way of Cain, committed Balaam's error, or engaged in Korah's rebellion?*

Next, Jude made a series of six comparisons to further characterize the false teachers (Jude 12, 13). He said they were (1) "blemishes at your love feasts," (2) "shepherds who feed only themselves," (3) "clouds without rain," (4) "autumn trees," (5) "wild waves of the sea," and (6) "wandering stars."

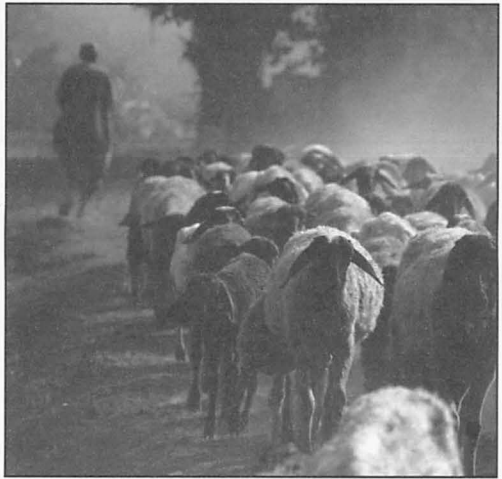
The first two comparisons go together. The false teachers were blemishes at love feasts by being shepherds who fed only themselves.

In the first centuries after Christ,

believers regularly ate a shared meal called a "love feast." This meal expressed the love Christians felt for one another because God in Christ had first loved them.

The false teachers evidently attended the love feasts held by the church (or churches) to whom Jude wrote. "Without the slightest qualm" they ate food earned by others.

While at those feasts, the false teachers behaved badly. We're not



*Jude compared false teachers with shepherds who feed only themselves, not their sheep.*

entirely sure how they acted, but the reference to "shepherds who feed only themselves" suggests that they were most interested in getting plenty to eat themselves, and weren't concerned if others had to go without food (compare I Cor. 11:17-34).

If so, that fits with what we know about the false teachers' self-indulgent characters.

Such behavior went against the purpose of the love feasts; the false teachers were like "blemishes" (Jude 12). If they had been good shepherds, they would have made sure that their sheep got sufficient grazing. But instead, they turned the feast of love into a feast of selfishness.

In another sense as well, the false teachers were "shepherds who feed only themselves." As teachers, the diet of teaching that they were feeding their sheep had no nutrition. Yet they were getting benefits from the sheep.

The last four of Jude's six comparisons are all alike in that they involve nature.

According to Jude's third comparison, the false teachers were "clouds without rain, blown along by the wind" (Jude 12; compare Prov. 25:14). A cloud that passes by without delivering rain is disappointing to a farmer or a gardener whose plants need a soaking. Similarly, the false teachers promised to deliver truth, but they had nothing of value to give the people.

In the fourth comparison, the false teachers were "autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead" (Jude 12). A tree that has no fruit when autumn, the time of the harvest, comes around is no good to anyone. In the same way, the false teachers failed to bear the fruit of spiritual wisdom that they claimed

to bear and indeed should have borne.

Not only were the teachers like barren trees, but they were even like uprooted barren trees. In this sense, they were "twice dead" (vs. 12). This description of barrenness and uprootedness underscores the fact that the false teachers had nothing good to offer.

For his fifth comparison, Jude said the false teachers were "wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame" (Jude 13; see Isa. 57:20). This comparison is not of something unproductive, like the rainless clouds or the fruitless trees. The waves produce something, but what they produce is undesirable. Waves dredge up dirt from the sea bottom like the false teachers brought up shameful words and deeds from out of their wicked nature.

Last, the false teachers were like "wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever" (Jude 13). From ancient times, the visible planets have been called wandering stars because their motion through the night sky differs from that of the stars. But in this case, Jude probably was referring to shooting stars (meteors) or to comets. Both appear as points of light in the sky for a while—meteors very briefly, comets for longer periods—and then disappear into the darkness. Like these celestial objects, the false teachers would blaze with worldly success for a period, but then would disappear into the darkness of hell forever.

**b**

## A Prophecy of Judgment (vss. 14-16)

Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him."

—Jude 14, 15

Seeing that the false teachers were selfish shepherds, twice-dead trees, and so on, judgment in the end times was approaching for them. Jude quoted from the Book of Enoch to that effect.

The Book of Enoch was a Jewish writing said to have been written by the Enoch mentioned in Genesis 5:18-24. Enoch was the seventh person listed in the genealogy of Adam through Adam's son Seth. Seven was the symbolic number for perfection, so Enoch's place in the genealogy was sometimes taken as indicating his spiritual greatness.

Many legends grew up about Enoch, especially because he was one of only two people in history known to have gone to heaven without first dying. The Book of Enoch appeared in the first century B.C., and by Jude's time was a highly respected writing. Probably most of the book was not really written by Enoch, but evidently the part Jude

## Jude's Sets of Three

One of the distinctive characteristics of Jude's writing style is that he liked to group terms in threes or multiples of three. Here are some of those groups:

- Jude wrote to those who had been "called . . . loved . . . and kept" (vs. 1).
- He wished his readers "mercy, peace and love" (vs. 2).
- He compared the false teachers to unbelieving Israelites, wicked angels, and people from the cities of the plain (vss. 5-7).
- Their ways were like "the way of Cain . . . Balaam's error . . . Korah's rebellion" (vs. 11).
- They were blemishes, selfish shepherds, rainless clouds, autumn trees, sea waves, and wandering stars (vss. 12, 13).
- They grumbled and found fault; they followed their own desires; and they boasted and flattered (vs. 16).

quoted had been handed down by tradition from Enoch.

In the portion of the book that Jude quoted, the coming of the Lord with hosts of angels is described. In its original context,

this quote referred to the day of the Lord, which was also a frequent topic in the Old Testament. Jude, however, applied the quote more specifically to Christ's second coming. Christians from the apostolic period onward have looked forward to the day when Christ will return for His own.

Yet as wonderful and glorious as the Lord's coming will be, it will be associated with judgment. The returned Lord will evaluate all people. Those who have not obeyed God through faith in Christ will be sentenced for their sins.

Four times Jude used the word translated "ungodly" (Jude 15). This emphasizes the lack of reverence for God that sinners, such as the false teachers, have.

Jude focused on the sins of speech committed by the ungodly. This was especially appropriate, evidently, in applying the quotation to the false teachers. "These men are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage" (vs. 16).

Sins of speech are some of the easiest to commit. Yet they are among the most harmful. With a word, we can crush someone's spirit, discredit Jesus Christ in someone's eyes, or curse the Lord who loves us. Each of us must maintain lifelong vigilance over his or her tongue.

*Ask Yourself . . . Do I sin with words often, sometimes, or never?*



## **A Call to Remember and Understand (vss. 17-19)**

Dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

—Jude 17-19

Although the false teachers were so wicked that the Lord was coming to judge them, Jude told his readers that they should not be surprised to find such people in their midst. Jude reminded his readers that the apostles had predicted that scoffers would appear in the end times. The prediction was coming true.

In the early church—before the New Testament was completed—the teaching of the apostles, whether communicated in writing or by word of mouth, provided the source for Christian beliefs. Jude's original readers apparently had heard some of the apostles in person. Perhaps at different times Peter, Paul, James, and others had come to their church (or churches). The readers would do well, Jude implied, if they held to the teachings of those men rather than to the teachings of the false teachers.

Jude reminded his readers of one warning in particular that the apostles had given: "In the last

times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires" (vs. 18). As a matter of fact, we find many warnings like this one in the Gospels and other New Testament books (examples: Mark 13:22; II Thess. 2:3). In the present text, Jude may have been summarizing statements made by apostles on different occasions rather than presenting an exact quote.

Jude evidently considered himself

to be living in the last times. And he believed the false teachers to be some of the predicted scoffers. They disputed God's laws, preferring instead to follow their own ungodly desires.

Going on, Jude pointed out that the scoffing false teachers were causing divisions. This may simply mean that some people sided with the false teachers, while others sided against them.

But if the false teachers were Gnostics, this may mean that they were dividing people into two categories: the spiritual (meaning Gnostics) and the sensual (all others).

If the false teachers considered themselves the enlightened and spiritual ones, then Jude's saying that they "follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit" (vs. 19) is particularly meaningful. The teachers were not spiritual but natural, not enlightened but instinctive.

Scoffers in our own day have the same characteristics as those in Jude's day. They cause divisions, they follow mere natural instincts, and they do not have the Spirit. Bad theology and bad living usually go together. If we see the one, we should be on the lookout for the other.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How do I react when I hear people scoff at biblical truth?*

## Last Times

In Jewish thought, history could be divided into two ages, often called "the present age" and "the age to come." Jews believed that the Messiah would usher in the age to come.

Christians, who know Jesus as the Messiah, recognize that the age to come has already broken in on the present age. But the final age hasn't entirely come. That awaits the second coming of Christ.

Jude believed that, in a sense, he was living in the last times, when scoffers would arise (Jude 18).





## Instructions and a Doxology (vss. 20-25)

**You, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. —Jude 20**

Most of the letter until this point is negative: it tells what was wrong with the false teachers. But at this point Jude turned positive. He started saying what his readers should do. The readers did not have to give in to the false teachers, and they could help rescue others from the clutches of the false teachers. This was to be their program for contending for the faith.

Verses 20 and 21 contain four instructions.

First, Jude told his readers to build themselves up in the faith. The false teachers were trying to tear them down. Despite that, the believers could act so that they would be more firmly established in faith than before.

Second, Jude told his readers to pray in the Holy Spirit. The false teachers, while considering themselves spiritual, were without the Holy Spirit. But the believers had the Spirit and could pray with His aid. This would be a way for them to keep within God's will.

Third, Jude urged his readers to keep themselves in God's love. They could do this by obeying God. The false teachers might consider immorality a sign of spiritual

greatness, but the Christians knew that God loves those who obey Him.

Finally, Jude called his readers to wait for Christ's mercy to bring them to eternal life. If the false teachers were early Gnostics, then they probably taught that eternal life is achieved by intellectual enlightenment. However, the believers understood that eternal life begins at the point of salvation through faith in Christ and reaches completion and fullness in heaven.

*Ask Yourself . . . Which of the four instructions in Jude 20 and 21 do I most need to heed?*

Jude's advice could help the believers protect themselves from false teaching. But he realized that believers would also need to know how to act toward those who had been influenced by the false teachers. So he provided some counsel along that line too.

Though Jude was harsh toward the false teachers, he was gentle toward believers who had been confused by the teachers. He advised the mature believers to show mercy toward those who were wavering. Sometimes when sinners refuse to repent, the best course is one of "tough love." But in this case, Jude judged that a light touch was needed. The believers could show waverers the truth, then forgive them and welcome them back into full church fellowship. By doing so, they could rescue some, like snatching a piece of wood out of a fire before it could burn.

Dealing with sinners always carries



risk. The restorers can be drawn into sin themselves.

Thus Jude advised his readers to maintain a healthy respect for the danger presented by the sinfulness they were dealing with. Just as corrupted flesh can stain the clothing that covers it, so the sin inspired by the false teachers could affect those who came in contact with it.

Jude's advice can come in handy for us, too, when we are trying to help sinners turn from their sin. With God's help, we can lead one another to purer lives in His sight. But as we do so, we ought to keep in mind our own weaknesses.

*Ask Yourself . . . Is there someone I can help rebound from sin? What are some effective steps I could take?*

Jude capped his letter with one of the Bible's most glorious doxologies (passages of praise).

While Jude recognized that the danger posed by the false teachers was severe, he was not pessimistic. If it were up to his readers alone to combat the false teachers, they would have been in real trouble. But they were not alone. God would help them, and (as Jude said) He "is



*Here is one kind of clothing commonly worn in the first century A.D. Jude advised Christians who would be helping sinners recover from sin to hate "even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh" (Jude 23).*

able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy" (vs. 24).

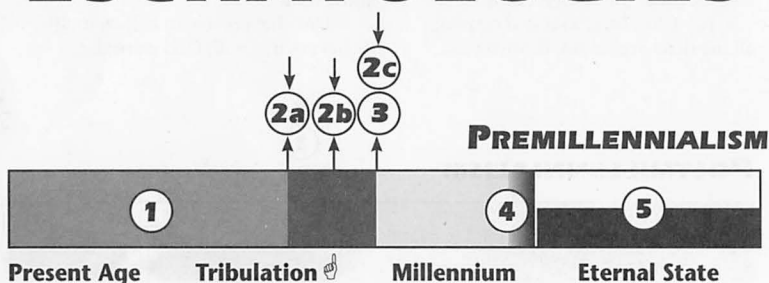
The false teachers wanted to see the believers soiled with sin, as they themselves were. But Jude's readers had already been washed clean of sin by the blood of Christ. They could keep from sinning if they remained faithful and dependent on God.

Like Jude's readers, we too are presented with situations in

which sinning seems the easiest thing to do. But we don't have to give in to that temptation. We can look to God in prayer and then say, "No, I just won't do it; I won't disobey the Lord I love." Someday all believers will be ushered into God's glorious presence without fault and with great joy.

The God who keeps us and welcomes us into His presence is worthy of every honor we can give—or even think of. All glory and majesty and power and authority belong to Him forever. Amen.

# THREE POPULAR ESCHATOLOGIES



1. During the present age, the Gospel is preached and meets a mixed reception.

2. Over a period of seven years, the Antichrist arises and a great rebellion and the great tribulation occur. Jews in mass are converted to Christ. The dead in Christ are resurrected and go to meet the Lord in the air; then living believers also meet the Lord in the air (the rapture).

2a. According to some premillennialists, the rapture occurs at the beginning of the seven-year tribulation period (pretribulationism).

2b. According to other premillennialists, the rapture occurs at the middle of the seven-year tribulation period (midtribulationism).

2c. According to yet other

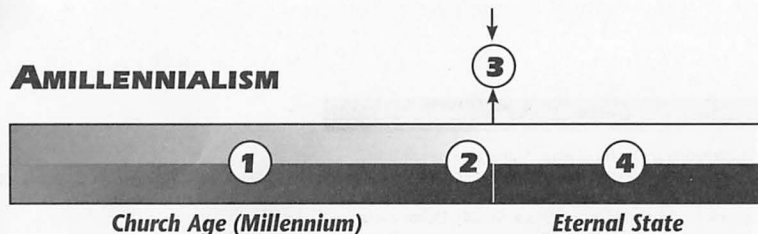
premillennialists, the rapture occurs at the end of the seven-year tribulation period (posttribulationism).

3. At the end of the seven-year tribulation period, the Lord returns to earth with raptured believers. According to some premillennialists, a second resurrection of believers occurs. Christ sets up an earthly kingdom and conducts a judgment to determine who will belong in the kingdom and who will not. During the thousand years (millennium) of this kingdom's existence, conditions on earth are much improved.

4. At the end of the millennial period, a final rebellion occurs, but Christ puts it down. Unbelievers are resurrected. Christ holds the final judgment.

5. Unbelievers live in hell eternally. Believers live with God eternally.

## AMILLENNIALISM



1. During the church age (the millennium of Revelation 20, symbolically interpreted), the Gospel is

preached to all nations and the fullness of Israel is converted. At the same time, however, evil increases.

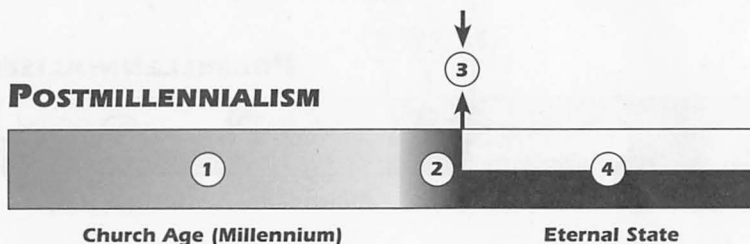
2. At the end of the church age, the Antichrist arises and for a short period (or, according to some amillennialists, exactly seven years) the great rebellion and the great tribulation occur.

3. Next, at Christ's second coming, all the dead are raised. Resurrected

believers, followed by believers living at the time of the second coming, meet the Lord in the air; then descend to the earth with Him. Christ conducts the final judgment.

4. Unbelievers live in hell eternally. Believers live with God eternally.

## POSTMILLENNIALISM



1. During the church age, the Gospel is preached to all nations so that a large percentage of people, including the fullness of Israel, is converted and society as a whole improves. The church age (or, according to some postmillennialists, the last thousand years of it) is the millennium.

2. At the end of the church age, however, the Antichrist arises and for a short period (or, according to some postmillennialists, exactly seven

years) the great rebellion and the great tribulation occur.

3. Next, at Christ's second coming, all the dead are raised. Resurrected believers, followed by believers living at the time of the second coming, meet the Lord in the air; then descend to the earth with Him. Christ conducts the final judgment.

4. Unbelievers live in hell eternally. Believers live with God eternally.

## Art Credits

Illustrations by Marla Shega. Maps by Russell Barr. Photography: Leandro Neumann Ciuffo (p. 7); sjhaytov/iStock (p. 15); Carole Raddato (p. 24); MikeLaptev/iStock (p. 25); imagospot/iStock (p. 64); Deror avi (p. 72); Bgabel (p. 84); RudolfIT/iStock (p. 88); NASA (p. 101); Markus Schieder/iStock (p. 106).