



# Until Then

A Study Through:

**1 & 2 THESSALONIANS**

“Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again.”

1 Thessalonians 5:23



# BACKGROUND

Thessalonica is the epitome of a port city nestled into the elbow of the Greek peninsula along the Aegean Sea. It is still a thriving port city today (called Thessaloniki) and has a long, ancient history of importance. It was formally established by Cassander of Macedon in 315 BC and named for his wife, Thessalonike, who was also the daughter of Philipp II of Macedon and sister of Alexander the Great. It was one of the most important cities in the Macedonian Empire until Macedonia was conquered by the Romans during the Third Macedonian War in 168 BC. Thessalonica was plundered with nearly all of its wealth sieged.

Yet, over the next two hundred years it regained its important status as an economic powerhouse in the Roman Empire where it became a free city ruled by its political system of *politarchs* (government officials, much like a city council.) This status was seldom awarded by the Roman government and required a commitment to peace within the city. Thessalonica was especially valued because it laid on the famous *Via Egnatia*, which was the main highway connecting Rome to the East. It had an abundant supply of water from local rivers (the Axios and Halaicmon) and served as a primary port for the export of the great bread basket of Asia Minor.

Gene Green puts it well, “*Thessalonica was situated on the edge of the great central plain of Macedonia, which boasted fertile soil and abundant rain and rivers. The climate was continental and not Mediterranean, with hot summers and cold winters suitable for growing grain and continental fruits but not crops such as olives and dates. Grazing land was abundant, and fish filled the nearby rivers, lakes, and the Thermaic Gulf. The mountains around the city were forested, providing an abundant source of timber for the construction of houses and boats.*”

Luke tells the story of Paul and his companions arriving at Thessalonica as part of the Macedonian call in Acts 16:6-17:9. Paul preached in the Jewish synagogue for three sabbaths where many were converted including “God-fearing Greek men and quite a few prominent women.” Yet, Paul’s evangelistic efforts stalled when some jealous Jewish men formed a mob and stirred up a riot looking for Paul and Silas who were in hiding. Instead, Jason, a recent convert and government official, and others were arrested and only released after paying the bond. Still, it appears the Good News of Jesus flourished in Thessalonica.

## AUTHOR

The author of both correspondences to the Thessalonians is Paul though Silas and Timothy are also listed in the opening phrase. The apostle Paul planted the church in Thessalonica according to Acts 17:1-9

## AUDIENCE

Paul writes to a small community of believers in Thessalonica. This church was composed mostly of Gentile converts across the social-economic stratum including Roman officials, women of high esteem, and household slaves.



# Until Then

## 1 Thess. 1:1-10

WEEK 1

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In verse 7, the authors say something about the church in Thessalonica that is unique in all the New Testament. They applaud the church for being a model or example to other churches for their evangelism. It's a quick note that is often overlooked, but we should linger a little longer upon it. Other individuals are applauded in the NT for being a model but this is the only place where an entire community of believers is referred to in this way. This is because Thessalonica had become a launching point for the Gospel throughout Macedonia and Achaia. Paul says that the "word of the Lord is ringing out from you to people everywhere." The word for "ringing out" (Gk. Execheo) is a word that refers to a sound echoing (note the Greek word) such as thunder. It is the idea of a sound growing as it reverberates further from its origination and this is the only place it is used in the NT. The good news that firmly established itself among the gentile believers in Thessalonica is now reverberating out! I'm so encouraged when I read these words. The task of evangelism by myself is often overwhelming and daunting. I stand before a great work that needs to be accomplished and feel overwhelmed. Yet, when I reflect on the church as a whole ringing out the good news, I'm filled with joy and enthusiasm. Though it might be overwhelming to me as an individual, it is a joyful mission of communal purpose in the life of our church. I want to be a part of a community that is echoing the hope of eternal life for all people!

### SUMMARY

Paul, Timothy, and Silas open their letter to the Church of the Thessalonians in a traditional Greco-Roman fashion by introducing themselves and the recipients of the letter. (As Paul is the predominant voice of the letter, we will refer to him as the author throughout this study.) Paul then gives thanks to God for the Thessalonian Christians. As is common in Paul's letters, he uses this prayer as a way to introduce the major themes found throughout the rest of the letter. Immediately, Paul points to the great trifecta of Christian virtue: faithful work, loving deeds, and enduring hope. In some sense, the entire rest of the first letter will be Paul working out these three virtues in the life of the Thessalonians (1: 8; 2:19; 3:2, 5-7, 10; 4:13; 5:8, 13). Even in the opening chapter, he expands briefly upon each by pointing to God's love in their choosing (4-7), their faithful work in sharing the Good News (8-9), and their well-known hope in the return of Jesus (10). He writes to encourage them to continue on until then!

### MEMORY VERSE

"So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord."

1 THESSALONIANS 1:6

## Social Context

In the Greco-Roman world, one of the primary social structures was called patronage and involved a relationship between patrons and clients. Patrons used their economic and social high standing to provide goods and services for clients who would return these elements for work or praise. The scholar Gene Green points out the three fundamental characteristics of a patron-client relationship. “In the first place, the patron/client relationship implied an interchange of goods and services. Secondly, the bond between a patron and client was personal and lasted for an indefinite period of time. Finally, the relationship was asymmetric in the sense that the patron and the client were not of equal social status and different types of goods and services were exchanged between them.” We will return to this concept throughout this study but it is specifically applicable in this passage when Paul refers to the Thessalonians “faithful work.” Evangelical Christians often struggle with Paul’s connection between faith and work in this short statement due to our allegiance to the theological concept of “faith alone” in regards to salvation. Yet, the word faith (Gk. *pistis*) was common language in patronage where the clients were said to have the faith (Gk. *pistis*) of their patron and vice versa. This faith could be seen in the demonstration of their work. Thus, Paul has no qualms with pointing to the “faith works” of the clients (Thessalonian Christians) which demonstrated their faith in both the patron Jesus and the patron Jesus’s faith in them. Their works, in this case, the spreading of the Gospel, demonstrated their allegiance to Jesus.

## Historical Background

Most scholars think that Paul wrote from Corinth where he spent over two years during his second missionary journey. If so, then this letter would have been written just a few months or close to a year after he departed from Thessalonica. This is interesting because Paul throughout the letter recurringly refers to hearing about the Thessalonian faith everywhere he travels. The good news of Jesus may have reached the cities Paul traveled to before his arrival there because of the work of the Thessalonian church. Thessalonica was a major port city fed by the famed Roman road, *the Via Egnatia*. It was, and still is, a major travel hub for Macedonia, Greece, and Rome. The Thessalonian church may have already sent delegates and missionaries to other port cities intentionally or simply as part of their normal business travel routine. It is remarkable but shouldn’t be a surprise that just months after establishing the church in Thessalonica Paul is now hearing of their kingdom impact far from their own shores in places like Corinth or, even, Athens.

## Text Notes

- 1:1 - “Paul, Silas, and Timothy.” The three authors are the same as those who founded the church in Thessalonica according to Acts 17. Though Timothy is not specifically mentioned in the text, he appears to have been with Paul throughout the journey according to Acts 16-17. Interestingly, Paul does not include his title as apostle in the opening of the letter. This is different than most of his correspondence. Most likely it is because of his relationship with the Thessalonians. He does not need to establish his credentials with the church that he intimately planted and recently worked alongside. Also, this might be because he does not address issues within the letter that he thinks will be challenged by opponents like in his letters to the Corinthians or Galatians.
- 1:1 - “church” (Gk. ἐκκλησίᾳ). The word “ecclesia” is a common Greek word for any gathering, but more significantly in this context, it is the word predominantly used for the Jewish gathering in the Greek Old Testament called the Septuagint (LXX). This alongside Paul’s remark that God chose the Thessalonians (1:4) is remarkable. He contends that this predominantly gentile Church is God’s chosen people.
- 1:4 - “Dear brothers and sisters (Gk. ἀδελφοῖ). The word for brothers and sisters is literally brother but includes the idea of all the family. In his commentary, Weima makes an interesting note, “In the two brief letters of Paul to the Thessalonians, the vocative plural “brothers” (ἀδελφοί) occurs twenty-one times — the highest occurrence per number of verses by far of any of his extant letters. This testifies to the close and warm relationship that the apostle shares with his converts in Thessalonica.”
- 1:5 - “Also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance.” This is a grammatically difficult phrase with three possible interpretations: “with power and the Holy Spirit and full conviction,” “with power given by the Holy Spirit and full conviction,” or “with power as the Holy Spirit gave full conviction.” Although difficult recent work on the grammar suggests the second or third options are preferred. The power comes from the Holy Spirit.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

If you could write a letter to any person and you knew for certain it would be read, who would it be and what would you want to say?

## *Read 1 Thess. 1:1-10*

## OPENING QUESTION

What do you remember from your study about the background to the church in Thessalonica? How was it formed? Why was it important? What was Thessalonica like? What city would you compare it to today?

*Read Acts 17:1-9 if needed.*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

In his writing, Paul loves triads. A triad is three words, phrases, or ideas all placed together. What triads do you see in this passage? What significance does each of them play? Where else do you see similar triads in scripture?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Paul refers to the church as imitating both the authors and Jesus. Of course, he applauds this imitation. We live in a culture that is vehemently opposed to imitation. We are routinely encouraged in targeted marketing to make our own path or go our own way. How have you wrestled with the concept of imitation in your own spiritual journey? How have you seen it as both the good and bad in the life of a church?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

As the notes point out, this is the only place in the NT where Paul applauds an entire congregation for their great evangelism. We tend to think of evangelism as our personal duty or responsibility. How does it change your view of evangelism to think of it as a part of the churches collective responsibility?

*Until Then*

# Until Then

## 1 Thess. 2:1-12

WEEK 2

### SUMMARY

In the opening twelve verses of chapter two Paul transitions away from the prayer of thanksgiving in the first chapter and into the main body of the letter. The main body of 1 Thessalonians is easily divided into two sections: 2-3 and 4-5. In 2-3, Paul celebrates his relationship with the Thessalonians and their continued faithfulness towards God. In 4-5, Paul encourages the church to carry on while also answering some deeper theological questions about death and the return of Christ. In the passage for this week, 2:1-12, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his pure intentions among them when he was preaching the Gospel. His stated goal was to “please God, not men.” Though this passage at points might seem a bit self-indulgent, Paul is reminding the church of his credibility among them before he shifts into addressing some of the sufferings that will be discussed in 2:13-16. Paul wants them to remember that their suffering was and is not for Paul’s good. He did not gain financially or socially because of their suffering. Instead, he will always hold them in his heart like his own children, willing to give completely of himself for their eternal gain as he writes, “for he called you to share in his Kingdom and glory.”

### MEMORY VERSE

“Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts.”

1 THESSALONIANS 2:4

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Multiple times in this passage, Paul refers to himself as a parent to the Thessalonians. He refers to himself both as their father in the faith and also as a nursing mother to them. In fact, more family language is used in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians than in any of his other letters. He wants the Gospel to be received in a way that specifically contrasts the social world of the Thessalonians, which is based on the motives of self-glorification through patronage. Paul goes above and beyond to show that his motives in sharing the Gospel were not so that the Thessalonians might owe him something in return. He intentionally did not take money from them so he would not be indebted to them. The community of God is not based on reciprocal relationships of commerce. Paul does not think of the Thessalonian Christians as a commodity but as his children. This is good for us to remember today as well. Too often, we think about the church as a service organization that offers goods and services. Our language, marketing, and even the way we treat one another are too often based on the principles of business rather than family. We treat ministers like executives and, in turn, ministers treat members like paying customers (or maybe it's the other way around?) What would it look like to genuinely think about church as a family? Who would be our fathers in the faith? Who would be our mothers? Who would be our children? How would it change the way we related to one another if the church genuinely functioned like a family?

## Literary Context

In chapter two Paul enters into a fairly extensive section of autobiography. Though Paul doesn't do this in all of his letters, he does do it fairly often (Rom. 1:11–16a; 2 Cor. 1:12–2:17, continued in 7:5–16 and 10:7–12:13; Gal. 1:11–2:21; Phil. 1:12–26; 3:2–14). This might seem boastful or arrogant on Paul's part, but this is a standard literary and rhetorical device in the Greco-Roman world. Some have argued he does this in 1 Thessalonians to defend himself from opposition to his Gospel. This seems unlikely as he doesn't refer to any opposition in the letters. Instead, his purpose seems more theologically significant. It is important to remember he has applauded the Thessalonians for imitating his faith. The Pauline scholar Lyons writes, "Succinctly and simply put, Paul's autobiographical remarks function not to distinguish him from his converts nor to defend his person or authority but to establish his ethos as an "incarnation" of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He highlights his "autobiography" in the interests of this gospel and his readers. He is concerned that, by imitating him, they too should incarnate the gospel. . . . His autobiographical remarks rarely supplement the major concern of a letter, but rather support it by means of a flesh-and-blood illustration (226–27)."

## Historical Background

A close reading of this passage reveals an interesting note about Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians. As is common Paul alludes to his fatherly relationship with the church. Yet, less common for Paul is that he refers to himself as being like a mother feeding or nursing her children. He writes in 2:7, "We were like a mother feeding and caring for her own children." The imagery is both unusual and startling. Different scholars and translations attempt to reconcile this maternal language by focusing on the nursing or nurturing language but in doing so they neglect both an important biblical motif and the heart of what Paul is trying to say. We shouldn't be afraid of Paul's plural self-identification with a mother nursing for three major reasons. First, Paul is reminding the Thessalonians that they are imitating him as he imitates his Father, God. In the same way, Paul is using well-known biblical language where God himself refers to his maternal nature in his relationship with Israel (Is 49: 15; 66: 12-13; Hos 11: 1, 3-4.) Likewise, as Jesus looks out over Jerusalem he invokes similar language referring to himself like a hen longing to gather her chicks under her wing (Matt. 23:37). Second, it is important to remember the note by Luke in Acts 17:4 describing the social makeup of the Thessalonian church. He specifically notes that there were "many prominent women." Paul may seek to specifically relate to the church by not exclusively using masculine imagery to describe his relationship with them. Just as the men in the church would have related to the metaphors of fatherhood so the women in the church would have related to the metaphors of motherhood. Finally, Paul's imagery of a nursing mother is especially appropriate because he is reminding the Thessalonians that he served them completely devoid of the need for reciprocity. Just as a mother feeds and nurtures her baby without desiring something in return, Paul has served the Thessalonians with no expectation of them providing anything for him. He says clearly in 2:9, "Don't you remember, dear brothers and sisters, how hard we worked among you? Night and day we toiled to earn a living so that we would not be a burden to any of you as we preached God's Good News to you."

## Text Notes

- 2:1 - "a failure" (Gk. κενη). There are multiple options for understanding this little phrase "a failure" or "in vain" (NIV). First, it could mean that Paul did not leave them empty-handed. In giving them the Good News, he gave them everything he could. Second, it could mean that his ministry was not without effect or results. So his ministry among them was not in vain. Third, Paul could be referring to his character. So, his ministry was not without integrity. I propose a fourth view that takes this phrase as pointing backward to 1:5 where Paul says they brought the message "not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance." Paul may be referring to the work of the Holy Spirit that accompanied his ministry among the Thessalonians. In other words, Paul's message was not in vain or empty because it came with the power of God demonstrated by the Spirit for their full assurance.
- 2:4 - "examines" (Gk. δοκιμάζω). This word is used a little over 20 times in the NT. It refers specifically to something being proved genuine only after it has been tested. Thus, Paul is reminding the Thessalonians that even if they doubt the integrity of his ministry among them, God has tested his ministry and found it genuine after examination.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

Who is someone in your life you would describe as a parent though they aren't actually a parent? What made this relationship so special?

*Read 1 Thess. 2:1-12*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul really leans into the family language in this passage. What different familial references do you see in this passage. What is the significance and purpose of each of those?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Paul refers to himself and his companions as serving the Thessalonians like a nursing mother taking care of her little children. This language is a bit unusual for Paul. Why do you think Paul includes it? What do you think about it? Read and discuss the following, related passages:

*Isaiah 49:15*

*Isaiah 66: 12-13*

*Hos 11: 1, 3-4*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul says that his purpose is always to please God not men. When you reflect on what you remember from his ministry, how did this idea play itself out? What did it mean for Paul to always please God not men?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

I think one of the hardest struggles for us as Christians is to please God not men. Do you agree? In what areas of your life have you found it most difficult to focus on pleasing God not men?

*Until Then*

# Until Then

## 1 Thess. 2:13-16

WEEK 3

### SUMMARY

This section is called a “second thanksgiving.” Paul shifts the conversation away from the Thessalonian's reception of the Gospel and into their continued faithfulness in the face of persecution. There are three things to note: First, Paul wants to make it emphatically clear that they are not following him as a philosophy teacher. It was common in larger cities of the Greco-Roman world to have famed teachers, philosophers, or rhetoricians come into a city on behalf of a benefactor and teach their school of philosophy. Paul is adamant that he is not like this. He isn't paid for his services. Rather, they heard the actual word of God. Second, their suffering authenticates Paul's message as the word of God. Each school of philosophy had a different view of suffering, but Paul teaches that suffering always accompanies God's word. This can be seen not only in Paul's life but also in the life of Jesus. Third, Paul points to the believers in Judea who face persecution from God's chosen people, the Jews. It might look like God is angry at those who are suffering, but his anger is actually being poured out on those who are inflicting the suffering in self-righteous neglect of God's word. The question then is, are the Thessalonians going to continue as those who suffer on behalf of God or those who face the wrath of God by turning away from him?

### MEMORY VERSE

“You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe.”

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

It's interesting to note the role of suffering in chapter two. Though it is first introduced in 1:6, Paul returns to the concept throughout the letter and appeals again to the importance of their suffering in 2:14. The emphasis is fascinating in this passage because of its connection to the spiritual practice of imitation. This language of imitation was standard in Greco-Roman schools of philosophy where students would imitate the virtue or character of their great teachers. For example, the Macedonian emperor Alexander the Great was known to be an imitator of Aristotle. What makes imitation distinct for Paul is the role of suffering. Paul is not only applauding the Thessalonians for their steadfastness in suffering but for the fact that they suffered at all in receiving the gospel. In other words, he considers their suffering to play a role in their imitation of the churches in Judea, Paul himself, and, most of all, Jesus. We don't know what to do with suffering in our Christian walk. I've heard some well-meaning Christians describe suffering as demonstrating a lack of faith. I've heard other Christians describe suffering as something to be ignored with bootstrap tenacity. Yet the NT is abundantly clear. Suffering is a vital part of Christlikeness. In suffering, we imitate the one who suffered for us. Paul in Romans 5:4-5 reminds us that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Where there is no suffering, there is no endurance, character or hope.

## **Literary Context**

Paul uses a wonderful little phrase in 2:13, "which it actually is." He's referring to the "Word" that he shared with the Thessalonians being the actual Word of God. There might not be a biblical concept that is as widely used and as poorly understood as the word of God. We routinely overcomplicate the concept of the word of God by diving too deeply into Greek word studies or systematically limiting the scope of the concept. It's best at times to just step back and recognize the simplicity of this concept. In its purest form, God's word is his revealed voice and will for his people. It is what he speaks. At times he speaks creation at other times destruction. He speaks wisdom and life. He speaks his desire for all people and he speaks the good news of forgiveness. His word is known in the created world and scripture. God's word is living and active (Heb. 4:12). God's word is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (Ps. 119:105). God's word endures forever (Is. 40:8). God's word will not return empty (Is. 55:11). Yet, God's word can also be ignored (Mt. 13:22), neglected (James 1:22), or forgotten (Pr. 4:5). According to John, Jesus is God's word fully made known as a human. Jesus is the ultimate fullness of God revealed. Thus, when Paul shares the Good News of Jesus he understands that he is in fact sharing God's Word.

## **Historical Background**

Paul refers to some form of persecution or suffering in Judea in this passage. There is some debate about the exact location that Paul is referring to when he says Judea. Judea was a small region in the broader area of Israel during the time of Paul's writing, but Judea could also be a reference to the entire area of Israel encompassing the whole region of Galilee, Samaria, and outlying areas often referred to as Palestine. Likewise, scholars debate what persecution Paul is referring to. It seems most likely that he is referring to the persecution that broke out against the church as initiated by Paul himself and recorded in Acts 8:1-4. Admittedly, we aren't certain if that persecution is still going on by the time Paul is writing to the Thessalonians. Some scholars don't think this is the persecution he's referring to because Paul would have mentioned his role in this persecution as he does in other places. Probably the strongest possibility is that Paul is referring to the persecution recorded by Josephus (a Jewish historian) during the late and early 50s AD in which a local group of Jewish zealots attempted to purge Israel of all Gentile influence. Undoubtedly, this persecution would have included Christians and better explains Paul's angry outburst that follows in the rest of 2:15-16.

## **Historical Background**

One of, if not the, most difficult theological statement in both of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians is his reference in 2:16 to the Jews continuing to "pile up their sins." He continues, "But the anger of God has caught up with them at last." The concept of the Jews piling up their sins to fulfillment is found throughout the prophetic passages as G. K. Beale points out, "the concept of "filling up sins" occurs elsewhere at significant redemptive-historical epochs to describe the opponents of God's plan to subdue the earth with his truth by his redeemed people. God stated in each case that his enemies had to complete a certain amount of sin before they could be considered ripe for definitive judgment, which would always conclude a particular epoch and launch another. For example, God prophesied that Abraham's descendants would not emerge from Egypt until the sin of the Amorites was "filled up" (anaplērō, Gen 15: 16). Similarly, Daniel 8: 23-25 states that judgment will come at the end of the age when sins have been "filled up" (plēroō; see also 2 Macc 6: 14; Wis 19: 1, 3, 4)... The last sentence of verse 16 is the result of corporate Israel's sin, which has reached its peak in Paul's day: the wrath of God has come upon them fully and finally."

## **Text Notes**

- 2:13 - "Therefore" (Gk. Καὶ διὸ τοῦτο Καὶ). What appears to be a fairly short transitional phrase is grammatically difficult. What the NLT translates as "therefore" is four words in Greek translated as something like "and therefore of this also." The phrase can either point backward to what Paul has already been saying about the Thessalonians' receiving of Paul or point forward to what he is going to say regarding their receiving of the Word from God.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

If you could write a thank you letter to an entire church from your spiritual past, what church would it be and what would you thank them for?

*Read 1 Thess. 2:13-16*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

What do you see as the relationship between suffering and receiving the word of God in this passage? What role does suffering have in our spiritual development according to Paul?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Have you ever faced any kind of persecution or suffering because you were a Christian? When was this and why were you persecuted? How did this effect you? Do you wish you could undo your suffering?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul says that the Thessalonians received his message as “the very word of God - which, of course, it is.” How did the early believers verify that the message Paul preached was the word of God?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

As Christians, we spend a lot of time defending scripture as the word of God. Do you think we should spend time on this? How does our approach to verifying God’s word differ from the early church’s approach? What might we learn from all of 1 Thessalonians 2 about how we defend the word of God?

*Until Then*

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## 1 Thess. 2:17-3:13

WEEK 4

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Paul longs to see the Thessalonians face to face. He makes it abundantly clear that though his heart is always with them, he yearns to be with them in person. The reason he cannot be with them is because Satan is preventing it from happening. He concludes this whole section with a prayer in which he petitions God to allow him to come. In other words, he's petitioning God to defeat Satan's barrier that is keeping him from being face-to-face with the Thessalonians. We aren't certain what that barrier is and Luke gives us little insight in Acts. Yet, I think there is an important theological point to be made here. In recent times it has become very en-vogue to participate exclusively with a church virtually or to "join" a church that isn't even geographically feasible to attend but the online preacher is really good. Paul's heart for the Thessalonians should confront this view. He is adamant that something is missing or lacking in the Thessalonians faith that he can only provide by being present in person with them. He says, "Night and day we pray earnestly for you, asking God to let us see you again to fill the gaps in your faith" (3:10). He sent his delegate Timothy to strengthen and encourage the church in person but Paul still needs to be present with them. Satan, the tempter is the one who blocks Paul's presence in the church. Satan wants to keep God's people from being present face to face because he, as the great tempter, knows that in our isolation we are the easiest to deceive and lead astray. In our physical isolation from one another, we continue to lack in our faith that which can only be filled up in physical presence.

### SUMMARY

In this passage, Paul expresses two different concerns. First, he is concerned about his inability to return to Thessalonica. This concern stems both from his desire to see his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica and also that this could be seen as a reason to doubt Paul's genuine care for them. Paul has already addressed how he did not share the Word with them for profit. Yet, some might see his continued absence as a reason for skepticism. Second, Paul is concerned that the ongoing persecution facing the Thessalonian church might cause some to slide in their faith. As Weima points out, "The same evil, supernatural power who lies behind Paul's inability to return to Thessalonica (2:18: "But Satan blocked our way") is also at work in the afflictions experienced by the Thessalonian believers (3:5: "The Tempter had tempted you"), threatening to destroy the success of the apostle's missionary work." Paul responds to both concerns as he addresses Timothy's return and joyful report. Timothy has reported the strength of their faith and their love for Paul himself. Paul's exuberant joy bursts out into another prayer to close this section of the letter in 3:11-13 with three main petitions to God: for the ability to travel to Thessalonica, for the Thessalonians love to overflow, and for their hearts to be strengthened until Jesus returns.

### MEMORY VERSE

After all, what gives us hope and joy, and what will be our proud reward and crown as we stand before our Lord Jesus when he returns? It is you! Yes, you are our pride and joy.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:19-20

## Literary Context

Biblical scholars have noted a specific type of literary technique within Paul's letter that begins here in 2:17 and runs through 3:11. This is a literary approach called an "apostolic parousia." The Greek word *parousia* means presence. This word will be a common theme throughout the rest of the letter. Most often it refers to the returning presence of Jesus, but in this context, it refers to Paul's role as an apostolic presence in the faith of the Thessalonian church. Weima points out in his commentary, "Yet in his letters, we often find a distinct section where Paul tries to make his presence more fully felt by the recipients. The most effective way he accomplishes this is by referring to a future visit that he plans to make to his readers. When such a visit is not possible, however, Paul makes his presence more powerfully experienced through two alternate means: he refers either to the sending of one of his emissaries for a visit, or to the act of his writing this letter to the recipients."

## Literary Context

Paul says, "Satan stopped us." Gene Green explains this concept well in his commentary, "He tells the Thessalonians that he tried to return on more than one occasion but that he and the apostolic team could not reach their goal because Satan stopped us. So great was their effort that only Satanic opposition could explain why they did not return! Stopped is a term that comes from the military. In order to stop the advance of enemy armies, soldiers would tear up and destroy the road to hinder their passage. Warfare imagery is embedded in the metaphor, Satan himself being their adversary. The battle was over the souls of the Thessalonian believers whom Satan tempted to commit the sin of apostasy (3.5 and comments; 1 Pet. 5.8). One of his tactics was to bar the way so the apostles could not return to the church. In spite of the opposition, they did manage to send Timothy back (3.1), and the church itself continued on in faith and love (3.5, 6)."

## Historical Background

Paul had a twofold purpose in sending Timothy. First, he wanted to send him to inquire how the church was holding up in the midst of continued persecution. Second, he wanted Timothy to strengthen and encourage them in their faith so that they would remain strong. It appears that although Timothy was an encouragement to the church, they still lacked something that they can only gain from Paul himself (3:10). Thus, Paul longs to return to Thessalonica and see the brothers and sisters so that he can both be encouraged by their ongoing faith and also build them up in what they are still lacking. This reveals the ongoing tension in Paul's heart as both a missionary planting new churches and a pastor wanting to care for the churches he has planted.

## Text Notes

- 2:17 - "separated" (Gk. ἀπορφαίζω). Literally, this word means "orphaned" and calls back to Paul's family language he has used throughout his letter so far. Just as Paul came to them like a child (2:7), he has now been orphaned from them.
- 2:17 - "Face" (Gk. πρόσωπον). All the English translations poorly miss the beautiful metaphor that Paul uses in 2:17. In the Greek Paul says, "Having been orphaned from you, in the face but not in heart, we long to see your face again." This is important because Paul uses the literary device of an *inclusio* in which the same word is used twice as bookends to pull together an extended thought. The word face is used twice in this passage to signal the *inclusio* and again in 3:10 where Paul says, "Night and day we pray earnestly for you that we may see your faces and complete what is lacking in your faith." Thus, everything between 2:17 and 3:10 should be considered one extended thought on Paul's face-to-face absence from them.
- 2:19 - "crown" (Gk. στέφανος). There are many Greek words for crown, but the word used here is specific for a type of laurel crown placed upon the head of those who are victorious in athletic games or war. It was not a metal crown but one made of local greenery. For the Thessalonians it was probably made with the famed leaves of the Macedonian oaks that were rare in the Mediterranean world. This is also the same type of crown that was made of thorns and placed upon Jesus head.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

Have you ever won an award or trophy? What was it and why did you receive it?  
Where is it now?

**Read 1 Thess. 2:17-3:13**

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul refers to the Thessalonians as his “crown” before the presence of Jesus when he returns. Why does Paul think this way about the Thessalonian church? How would it change us if we thought the same way that Paul did about our goals and achievements? What will be your crown when Jesus returns?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

What role does Satan play in this passage? How does Paul think about Satan's role as the tempter? How does he interact with Satan? Have you ever wrestled with Satan as the tempter? What was that struggle like?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Read the following quote on this passage from the scholar G. K. Beale:

*“Too often Christians who suffer do not view their suffering within a redemptive-historical context. They may rightly see their suffering as a test of their individual faith and as something through which they need to endure in order to grow in their faith. When, however, we are able to view our afflictions through a wide-angle lens as part of the great trial that was prophesied to come upon God's people at the end, our endurance takes on more significance, since it identifies us with Jesus' (i. e., true Israel's) own victorious forbearance in suffering, climaxed by his death and resurrection. We become identified with the redemptive-historical storyline of Scripture and, in particular, with the great messianic victory over evil, which will be concluded at the second coming.”*

How would you describe in your own words what he is saying?  
What do you think of his view on suffering?  
What role does suffering play in our identity formation?

**Until Then**

# Until Then

## 1 Thess. 4:1-12

WEEK 5

### SUMMARY

To this point in the letter, Paul has focused his attention on praising the church for their faithfulness while also updating them on his current status. Now, Paul moves into his advice or exhortation for the church. This is a specific type of Greco-Roman letter called a “parenthesis” (a word that means advice in Greek). It appears with the transitional phrase, “As for other matters” (NIV) that Paul is specifically addressing questions or concerns that Timothy brought back for him to address. This passage is divided into three sections:

**4:1-2:** Paul provides the foundation for Godly conduct by reminding the church that Paul’s word carries the authority of the Lord. Paul uses his favorite metaphor for Christian life by urging them to “walk in a way worthy.” The Christian life is a walk of honor with God.

**4:3-8:** Paul addresses the specific issue of sexual morality in the church by urging holiness through self-control. He reminds the church that God not only has a standard for sexual morality but also that he will strike vengeance on those who defy his authority.

**4:9-12:** It appears the church has expressed concerns over how to truly love one another and Paul assures them they are already abounding in their love for one another. They should be focused on living respectful lives especially in the public square.

### MEMORY VERSE

Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands, just as we instructed you before.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:11

## Literary Context

There is a lot of debate around the interpretation of the phrase in 4:4, “Then each of you will control his own body” (NLT). Most translations offer a footnote that explains that the phrase in the original Greek is “will know how to possess his own vessel.” The confusion centers around what Paul means by the word vessel (Gk. σκεῦος) which is used over twenty times in the NT. There are three possible meanings carrying two understandings of vessel. First, Paul could be using vessel to refer to a wife. This usage appears to have been somewhat common and Peter uses it specifically in 1 Peter 3:7 when he commands husbands to treat their wives with respect as the “weaker vessel.” If the issue in Thessalonica is that some men are having sex with other men’s wives then Paul is urging the Thessalonians to cling to their wives only. Second, building on this option Paul might be telling the unmarried men in the church to no longer fulfill their sexual desires through prostitutes but to acquire their vessel, i.e. find a wife. The final option seems most likely and takes a different translation for “vessels.” In the Septuagint, the word vessel is used to refer to the sexual organs of David’s men who have restrained from being with women (1 Sam. 21:5-6). Paul is most likely picking up this usage by euphemistically saying “control your vessels” in holiness and honor.

## Historical Background

It is impossible to discuss Paul’s advice on sexual holiness among the Thessalonians without some background information regarding the sexual norms of the ancient Roman world specifically in Macedonia. It was commonplace for marriages to be arranged between men in their twenties and women in their early teens. These were family arrangements intended to continue a lineage of honor among family names and continue the accumulation of wealth and power. Well-structured marriages led to a well-structured society. There was really no concept of love the way we think about it today. Nobody fell in love or got married to have sex. In the same way, sex was not limited to marriage, especially for the husbands. As the Greek orator Demosthenes (384–322 BC) said, “Mistresses we keep for our pleasure, concubines for our day-to-day physical well-being, and wives in order to bear us legitimate children and to serve as trustworthy guardians over our households.” Adultery got so bad that the emperor Augustus (63 BC - AD 14) created the Julian Laws regarding fidelity in marriages though they caused little reform. Especially in Macedonian life, it appears that it was common for married men to try and sexually lure the wives of other prominent men to show their superiority. Paul may be specifically addressing this issue in the letter. Sexuality was also closely tied to the pantheon of deities and prostitution was a cultic practice that centered around the temples. So just as the new Thessalonians believers gave up the worship of local deities they were also called to give up the sexual promiscuity that accompanied those gods.

## Text Notes

- 4:1 - “live in a way” (Gk. περιπατέω). Literally, this word means, “to walk.” English translations translate the metaphor as live although walking with God is Paul’s primary language for the Christian life. This word is used nearly a hundred times in the NT. The scholar Gary Shogren points out, “Like all Jews, Paul was well acquainted with the equivalent Hebrew verb, *hālak*. For example: “Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they were not willing to walk, and whose law they did not obey?” (Isa 42:24b NASB). From this verb is derived halakah, the label the rabbis gave to ethical instruction.”
- 4:1 - “as we taught you” (Gk. παραλαμβάνω). Literally, this word means “as you received.” Most commentaries note that Paul uses it in a semi-technical form to refer to the authoritative teaching he gave to the churches. This can especially be seen when paired with the concept of walking with God. It was common in a culture with low literacy to have disciples receive teaching or tradition and then recite it back from memory to ensure accuracy and retention.
- 4:9 - “loving each other” (Gk. φιλαδελφία). This is one of the six occurrences of the famous word “philadelphia” or “brotherly love” that occurs in the NT. Paul accentuates that their love for one another is about family loving each other like fathers and sons, mothers and daughters.
- 4:11 - “make it your goal (Gk. φιλοτιμέομαι). This unusual word (only used here and in 2 Co 5:9) was used in reference to the Greco-Roman elite make generous donations to their city, but here the generous donation is to live quietly, mind your own business, and work with your hands.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

What does a quiet life look like in your mind? How would you describe it?

*Read 1 Thess. 4:1-12*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul begins the entire second half of the letter to the Thessalonians with the phrase “live in a way that pleases God.” Literally, this is the phrase “walk in a manner worthy.” Paul’s favorite word for the Christian life is “walk.” Why do you think this is such a good metaphor for Christian living? Why does Paul use it?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

For the Thessalonians, walking with Christ meant a change in their understanding of sexual morality. They now had to take a different view of sexual conduct because of God’s holiness. In what areas of our life today does following Christ mean we must be different than the predominant culture around us?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Most translations make a paragraph break between v. 10 and 11. Yet, most scholars disagree and think all of 9-12 is one cohesive thought about brotherly love. How does it change the reading of 11-12 if it is included with the preceding thought of 9-10? What issues might Paul be addressing when we read it this way?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

There is a revival underway in our current culture to live more quiet lives that value hard work and simplicity. Why do you think this is occurring culturally? What would a quiet life look like in Paul’s mind? How might Paul’s words to live a quiet life and work with your hands still encourage us today? Why would this be effective for evangelism?

*Until Then*

# Until Then

## 1 Thess. 4:13-18

WEEK 6

### SUMMARY

In the reading for this week, Paul continues to answer the questions Timothy brought back from his time with the Thessalonian church. He addresses the church's concerns over what happens to those who have died when Jesus returns. Paul reassures them with the hope of joining in Jesus' triumphant return. Paul describes the return of Jesus in three stages:

1. Jesus descends or returns from heaven. This is the anticipated Parousia (see notes on the backside). This return is described with three phrases all connected grammatically by the word "with" (Gk. ἐν): "with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God." The first stage of Jesus' return is marked by the loud announcement and celebration of his coming.
2. Those who have died as Christians will be resurrected. Paul uses the common metaphor of sleeping to describe those who have died in Christ. They will rise first and meet the King upon his return.
3. Those who are still alive will also be "snatched up" in the cloud to join the newly resurrected Christians and the resurrected king. Together, all Christians will serve as the delegates joining with the returning Christ. Paul assures that there will never be a time when the Lord and his people won't be together.

### MEMORY VERSE

And now, dear brothers and sisters,  
we want you to know what will  
happen to the believers who have  
died so you will not grieve like  
people who have no hope.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Over the last decade or so I have performed many funeral services. During this time I began to open funerals with the same thought. I say, "It has become en vogue in our culture to think of memorial services as a celebration, often we even refer to them as a celebration of life. It is important to celebrate this person's life, but today we also mourn. The wise teacher in Ecclesiastes reminds us "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance." He continues to teach that "the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning." We should not neglect the importance of mourning over our loss today. Feel free to cry, to hold the hand of someone next to you, to share a Kleenex, and remember deeply despite the pain it might bring. It is the God of eternal hope, the Christ of the resurrection who the scriptures says mourned deeply at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. The weight of our tears measure the significance of this person's life." This thought is important in the conversation around 1 Thessalonians. Some say that this passage teaches us we shouldn't mourn when a Christian dies, but it does no such thing. It teaches us that we shouldn't mourn like those who have no hope. We still mourn and hurt over the loss of the ones we love but our grief is always consoled by our hope. We mourn within the framework of eternal life. Despair cannot triumph in an empty tomb.

## Historical Background

As you might imagine there is a lot of material from Greco-Roman culture about their view of death. There were differing views based on various schools of philosophy. Interestingly for the modern mind, one's religion or worship of a deity had very little to do with what happened after you died. The capricious nature of the deities left little hope for meager humans. This might have been the only consistent theme in the Greco-Roman world. There is no hope after death. The Greek poet Theocritus wrote, "Hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope." A form of letter called a consolation letter was commonplace around death. These letters give insight into the Greco-Roman thoughts around the dead and reveal six specific characteristics of death as Stanley Stowers points out in his work on letter writing in the Greco-Roman world: 1. Death is inevitable. 2. Death is the fate of all, kings and beggars, rich and poor. 3. The person's memory and honor will live on in spite of death. 4. Death releases one from the evils of life. 5. The funeral and the tomb are a great honor to the deceased. 6. Either death is nonexistence and does not matter to the dead or it leads to some happier state of existence."

## Historical Background

We have already mentioned the term *parousia* in the notes, but in this week's passage, we begin to give it specific attention. In 4:15 Paul refers to those "who are still living when the Lord returns." The word *returns* is the Greek word *parousia*. Other translations use the word *coming*. This is a technical term in the Greco-Roman world. It could refer to a deity coming to a people or a dignitary coming into a city. There is strong historical support for both meanings. Paul has both meanings in mind. Christ will come again as both the victorious emperor entering the city and as God coming to his people. The historical background on this concept is important for understanding the following verses where Paul applies imagery of an emperor entering a city to describe the forthcoming *parousia* of Jesus. Weima describes well the scene of a *parousia* in the Greco-Roman world,

"Although there was no fixed form to what happened at these formal receptions, they frequently involved the following elements... Once civic leaders became aware that a king or important official was coming to their city, they would adopt a formal resolution to pay tribute to that person by hosting a formal reception in his honor. Prominent citizens—including often priests and priestesses, officers and soldiers, leading teachers and their students, and victorious athletes—were then chosen to be part of the delegation that would meet the visiting dignitary outside the city walls, sometimes a great distance away. Those in the official reception party dressed in their finest clothes (frequently white) and wore laurel wreaths on their heads. Those who remained behind also often wore special clothes and garlands and decorated the city in festive colors. The delegation would greet the coming dignitary with shouts of praise and song, and then escort him the rest of the way into their city, where the citizens would similarly welcome him with incessant shouts and applause. Once inside the city walls, the dignitary would offer sacrifices on the local altars and perhaps pronounce judgment on select prisoners, liberating some but sentencing others to execution."

## Text Notes

- 4:16 - "Shout" (Gk. κέλευσμα). This is the only use of this word in the NT, but it was widely used outside of scripture. It is a military term that was used to describe the order an officer would give to his soldier. It was also used to describe motivational shouts in chariot and boat races. Later it took on the meaning of a formal decree from a political official. The concept used in this setting is that Jesus gives an authoritative command from the heavens to initiate his *parousia*.
- 4:16 - "trumpet" (Gk. σάλπιγξ). The trumpet was widely used in the Roman world not as an instrument but in military processions and funerals. Many scholars point out that at the death of the emperor Claudius, the trumpets were so loud that even the dead could hear them. Paul may have this general concept in mind though he is most likely writing during the life of Claudius.
- 4:17 - "Caught up" (Gk. ἀρπάζω). This word means to be snatched or plucked away. Much "rapture" theology has been derived from Paul's word choice, but he probably has a different idea in mind as Weima points out, "Paul's choice of *harpazō* was intended not to teach "a secret rapture of the church" but rather to make a possible wordplay, since non-Christian writers often used this term to speak of life or the living being "snatched away" by death."

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

If you could ask Paul any question, what would it be?

**Read 1 Thess. 4:13-18**

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

In this section Paul is responding to questions that the Thessalonians have about their new faith in Jesus as the Messiah. What question or questions do you think that Paul is specifically answering in this passage? Why would these be important questions for the Thessalonians?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

How does knowing the background of the term “parousia” (see notes) give insight into what Paul is describing in regards to Jesus return? How does this help us better understand the metaphors and language Paul uses to describe Jesus’ return? What sticks out to you about his return in this passage?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

When is a time in your life you have experienced loss and truly grieved?

What was that grief like for you? How did you process it?

Paul says that we as Christians should “not grieve like people who have no hope.” In what ways is our grief different because of Jesus?

How then should a Christian funeral look different then a secular funeral?

**Until  
Then**

# Until Then

## 1 Thess. 5:1-11

WEEK 7

### SUMMARY

Paul continues with the questions he receives from Timothy's return. Having discussed what happens to those who die in Christ, he moves immediately into teaching on when Jesus will return. It appears that the church is caught up in the debates about when the "Day of the Lord" might come. Paul reminds them they cannot and will not know the Day of the Lord until it is upon them. He uses three metaphors to describe the return of Jesus. First, it will be like a thief in the night. Rather than focus on the ominous tone of this metaphor, we should see that Paul is pointing out the unexpected nature of Jesus' coming. No one knows when it will happen just like no one knows when a thief will break in. Second, everyone will be saying "peace and security" (see notes on the backside) when the time comes. Again Paul points out the unexpected nature of his return. Finally, it will come like labor pains upon a woman. A woman might know she is pregnant and expect to give birth, yet her pains still catch her off guard. Paul spends the next few verses expanding on these metaphors and reminding the church to live in the light so they are always prepared for his return. He concludes with the affirmation to "encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing." The result of any rumination on Jesus' return should always be the mutual encouragement and love of the church.

### MEMORY VERSE

Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever. So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:10-11

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

My family has decided to raise a brood of chickens. There are currently seventeen chicks that in the last week have begun to find their wings. I made a small, temporary chicken cage for them as they grew but suddenly I've realized I must get their permanent coop done way faster than I originally expected. I'll be honest, I've been putting off building their coop. I have a little anxiety over building them a proper home. I'm not worried about the structural integrity or my ability to build the coop. I can pop up something usable in a day or two. It won't be social media-worthy, but it will keep a chicken. I'm worried that what I build them won't be secure enough to keep them safe from the dark night. Bad things happen to chickens at night in a poorly built coop. I've seen the destruction first hand on multiple occasions. I can build something to protect them from the heat of the day but I'm concerned about keeping them safe from the thieves in the night. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that Jesus' return will come like a thief in the night. Everyone will be saying that they are safe and secure in the homes they have built, but there is nothing any of us can do to be protected when the thief comes. Paul reminds the Thessalonians then and us today, that salvation comes only through him. We can't escape the darkness through the structures we create. Instead, we must live as chicks of the light until the mother hen comes and shields us forever under her wings.

## Literary Context

Preoccupation with when the Day of the Lord would arrive is a common biblical theme. After an extensive vision of the day of the Lord in Daniel, one of the prophets “asked the man dressed in linen, who was now standing above the river, ‘How long will it be until these shocking events are over?’” Following this same pattern throughout the Gospels, the disciples of Jesus routinely ask a similar question. Matthew 24:3 says, “As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. ‘Tell us,’ they said, ‘when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’” Similarly, in Luke 17:20 the Pharisees ask Jesus when the Kingdom of God will arrive. Finally, the apostles again ask Jesus following the resurrection in Acts 1:7, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

There is nothing new in our world today as we seem just as fascinated with reading the global political signs to know the day of the Lord. Paul’s reminder that the day is unknowable in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 calls back to the strong teaching of Jesus. In Luke 17 Jesus teaches not to go off chasing those who claim to know when the Lord will return for “the Son of Man in is day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other.” Paul’s reminder is good for us today as well, live all our days as children of light without worry for when the Lord will return because we can be assured, we won’t miss it.

## Historical Background

One of the most important historical elements for the quick spread of the Gospel of Jesus was the overall peace and stability within the larger Roman world. This is referred to as the *Pax Romana*. Paul and many other missionaries were able to travel safely throughout the empire because of this period of political security. In fact, the *Pax Romana* was so adored by the Romans that it was common to recite the phrase “*pax et securitas*” (peace and security). Undoubtedly Paul is adopting and even mocking this phrase in v. 3 when he claims everyone will be saying, “peace and security” as Jesus returns. Though Paul might be able to travel freely because of the stability of the Roman government, he is not enamored with empires claims to safety for its citizens. As Seyoon Kim says Paul “apparently was critical of the imperial propaganda of *pax et securitas* for its hubris and inadequacy.” One can imagine that Paul, who has been unjustly flogged and persecuted although himself a Roman citizen, has little trust in the claimed *pax et securitas*. Instead, he finds peace and security only in the salvation of Jesus who will return to reign in totality.

The New Testament scholar Andy Johnson in his commentary on this text makes some astute observations about our current relationship to “peace and security.” He writes, “Much of Christian history has been characterized by just that reality, from Christians defending the “peace and security” of the Holy Roman Empire down to some who defend even the use of torture to protect America’s “peace and security.” It has become commonplace even in some popular Christian media to hear the phrase “the idolatry of security,” as characterizing much of American Christianity. Ironically, like those outside the church in ancient Thessalonica, church insiders often reify false images of the divine to underwrite various forms of injustice in the name of “security,” whether that be economic, social, or “homeland” security... I do not mean to suggest that it is imprudent for any society to take precautions to deter those who would perpetuate violence on vulnerable people or that Christians ought not to support at least some such measures... But at the very least, Christian leaders of all stripes ought to raise their congregations’ awareness about the challenge of dealing with their own “idolatry of security.”

## Text Notes

- 5:6, 10- “Stay alert, alive” (Gk. γρηγορέω). Literally this word means, “watchers.” It might be a veiled reference to the angels in Daniel 4:13, 23 who were known as the “watchers.” Christians are to be like diligent angels looking for Christ’s return.
- 5:8 - “armor faith... wearing the helmet of salvation.” Most Christians recognize this phrase as the armor of God from Ephesians 5, but as this passage predates Ephesians we see already a consistent concept of God’s armor most likely derived from Isaiah 59:17.
- 5:5 - “Children of light and the day” (Gk. γὰρ ὑμεῖς υἱοὶ φωτός ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ἡμέρας.). Literally, Paul says you are all sons of the light and sons of the day. Besides the many biblical references to living or walking in the light, the Essene community of Jewish zealots whom we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls routinely referred to themselves as children of the day or light.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

Can you recall a time in your life that you were truly scared?  
When was it and what was it like?

*Read 1 Thess. 5:1-11*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul uses his literary mastery in this verse with a play of light and darkness. Trace all of the ways Paul refers to light or dark in any form in this passage. What sticks out to you about this teaching? Where else do you see the themes of light and dark play out in scripture that might relate to this passage?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

The notes included a controversial quote from Andy Johnson concerning the term “peace and security.” Read that quote again out loud in your group and interact with it. What do you agree or disagree with? In what ways do we as Christians participate in the idol of security?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Paul concludes his entire discussion about what happens to us after we die or when he returns with the summarizing phrase, “we will live together with Him.” Why is this phrase such a good concluding statement for all of his teaching?

What does this phrase teach us about our eternal condition?

When you reflect on all of Paul’s teachings about death and the return of Jesus in 4:13-5:11 what take aways do you have?

*Until  
Then*

# Until Then

## 1 Thess. 5:1-11

WEEK 7

### SUMMARY

Paul continues with the questions he receives from Timothy's return. Having discussed what happens to those who die in Christ, he moves immediately into teaching on when Jesus will return. It appears that the church is caught up in the debates about when the "Day of the Lord" might come. Paul reminds them they cannot and will not know the Day of the Lord until it is upon them. He uses three metaphors to describe the return of Jesus. First, it will be like a thief in the night. Rather than focus on the ominous tone of this metaphor, we should see that Paul is pointing out the unexpected nature of Jesus' coming. No one knows when it will happen just like no one knows when a thief will break in. Second, everyone will be saying "peace and security" (see notes on the backside) when the time comes. Again Paul points out the unexpected nature of his return. Finally, it will come like labor pains upon a woman. A woman might know she is pregnant and expect to give birth, yet her pains still catch her off guard. Paul spends the next few verses expanding on these metaphors and reminding the church to live in the light so they are always prepared for his return. He concludes with the affirmation to "encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing." The result of any rumination on Jesus' return should always be the mutual encouragement and love of the church.

### MEMORY VERSE

Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever. So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:10-11

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

My family has decided to raise a brood of chickens. There are currently seventeen chicks that in the last week have begun to find their wings. I made a small, temporary chicken cage for them as they grew but suddenly I've realized I must get their permanent coop done way faster than I originally expected. I'll be honest, I've been putting off building their coop. I have a little anxiety over building them a proper home. I'm not worried about the structural integrity or my ability to build the coop. I can pop up something usable in a day or two. It won't be social media-worthy, but it will keep a chicken. I'm worried that what I build them won't be secure enough to keep them safe from the dark night. Bad things happen to chickens at night in a poorly built coop. I've seen the destruction first hand on multiple occasions. I can build something to protect them from the heat of the day but I'm concerned about keeping them safe from the thieves in the night. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that Jesus' return will come like a thief in the night. Everyone will be saying that they are safe and secure in the homes they have built, but there is nothing any of us can do to be protected when the thief comes. Paul reminds the Thessalonians then and us today, that salvation comes only through him. We can't escape the darkness through the structures we create. Instead, we must live as chicks of the light until the mother hen comes and shields us forever under her wings.

## Literary Context

Preoccupation with when the Day of the Lord would arrive is a common biblical theme. After an extensive vision of the day of the Lord in Daniel, one of the prophets “asked the man dressed in linen, who was now standing above the river, ‘How long will it be until these shocking events are over?’” Following this same pattern throughout the Gospels, the disciples of Jesus routinely ask a similar question. Matthew 24:3 says, “As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. ‘Tell us,’ they said, ‘when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’” Similarly, in Luke 17:20 the Pharisees ask Jesus when the Kingdom of God will arrive. Finally, the apostles again ask Jesus following the resurrection in Acts 1:7, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

There is nothing new in our world today as we seem just as fascinated with reading the global political signs to know the day of the Lord. Paul’s reminder that the day is unknowable in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 calls back to the strong teaching of Jesus. In Luke 17 Jesus teaches not to go off chasing those who claim to know when the Lord will return for “the Son of Man in is day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other.” Paul’s reminder is good for us today as well, live all our days as children of light without worry for when the Lord will return because we can be assured, we won’t miss it.

## Historical Background

One of the most important historical elements for the quick spread of the Gospel of Jesus was the overall peace and stability within the larger Roman world. This is referred to as the *Pax Romana*. Paul and many other missionaries were able to travel safely throughout the empire because of this period of political security. In fact, the *Pax Romana* was so adored by the Romans that it was common to recite the phrase “*pax et securitas*” (peace and security). Undoubtedly Paul is adopting and even mocking this phrase in v. 3 when he claims everyone will be saying, “peace and security” as Jesus returns. Though Paul might be able to travel freely because of the stability of the Roman government, he is not enamored with empires claims to safety for its citizens. As Seyoon Kim says Paul “apparently was critical of the imperial propaganda of *pax et securitas* for its hubris and inadequacy.” One can imagine that Paul, who has been unjustly flogged and persecuted although himself a Roman citizen, has little trust in the claimed *pax et securitas*. Instead, he finds peace and security only in the salvation of Jesus who will return to reign in totality.

The New Testament scholar Andy Johnson in his commentary on this text makes some astute observations about our current relationship to “peace and security.” He writes, “Much of Christian history has been characterized by just that reality, from Christians defending the “peace and security” of the Holy Roman Empire down to some who defend even the use of torture to protect America’s “peace and security.” It has become commonplace even in some popular Christian media to hear the phrase “the idolatry of security,” as characterizing much of American Christianity. Ironically, like those outside the church in ancient Thessalonica, church insiders often reify false images of the divine to underwrite various forms of injustice in the name of “security,” whether that be economic, social, or “homeland” security... I do not mean to suggest that it is imprudent for any society to take precautions to deter those who would perpetuate violence on vulnerable people or that Christians ought not to support at least some such measures... But at the very least, Christian leaders of all stripes ought to raise their congregations’ awareness about the challenge of dealing with their own “idolatry of security.”

## Text Notes

- 5:6, 10- “Stay alert, alive” (Gk. γρηγορέω). Literally this word means, “watchers.” It might be a veiled reference to the angels in Daniel 4:13, 23 who were known as the “watchers.” Christians are to be like diligent angels looking for Christ’s return.
- 5:8 - “armor faith... wearing the helmet of salvation.” Most Christians recognize this phrase as the armor of God from Ephesians 5, but as this passage predates Ephesians we see already a consistent concept of God’s armor most likely derived from Isaiah 59:17.
- 5:5 - “Children of light and the day” (Gk. γὰρ ὑμεῖς υἱοὶ φωτός ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ἡμέρας.). Literally, Paul says you are all sons of the light and sons of the day. Besides the many biblical references to living or walking in the light, the Essene community of Jewish zealots whom we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls routinely referred to themselves as children of the day or light.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

Can you recall a time in your life that you were truly scared?  
When was it and what was it like?

*Read 1 Thess. 5:1-11*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul uses his literary mastery in this verse with a play of light and darkness. Trace all of the ways Paul refers to light or dark in any form in this passage. What sticks out to you about this teaching? Where else do you see the themes of light and dark play out in scripture that might relate to this passage?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

The notes included a controversial quote from Andy Johnson concerning the term “peace and security.” Read that quote again out loud in your group and interact with it. What do you agree or disagree with? In what ways do we as Christians participate in the idol of security?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Paul concludes his entire discussion about what happens to us after we die or when he returns with the summarizing phrase, “we will live together with Him.” Why is this phrase such a good concluding statement for all of his teaching?

What does this phrase teach us about our eternal condition?

When you reflect on all of Paul’s teachings about death and the return of Jesus in 4:13-5:11 what take aways do you have?

*Until  
Then*

# Until Then

## 1 Thess. 5:12-22

WEEK 8

### SUMMARY

As Paul begins to close the letter, he enters into a standard formula of reminding the church of various quick points about the faith. The primary theme of this section is peace. The term peace (Gk. eirene) bookends this section (5:13, 23). It's used as a verb in 5:13, "Live in peace with one another" and as a noun in 5:23, "May the God of peace make you holy." Peace within the body demonstrates holiness and reflects God's transcendent peace. In the same way, the term for brothers and sisters (Gk. adelphos) is used five times in the concluding 15 verses. Just as peace is the aspiration for healthy families, it is even more important for the family of God. All of Paul's scattered teachings in this section point towards peace and unity within the body. The church is to respect and honor its leadership for this peace (5:12-13). Everyone is to encourage and build up the entire flock with patience (5:14). Vengeance, the great destruction of peace, is to have no place in the church nor outside relationships (5:15). Joy, prayer, and gratitude are the defining virtues of those who follow God's will (5:16-18). Finally, the work of the Holy Spirit in prophecy should be heard and tested for what is good and beneficial for establishing peace in God's kingdom (5:19-21).

### MEMORY VERSE

16 Always be joyful. 17 Never stop praying. 18 Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

"I'm just not feeling it today." It's a common refrain in our contemporary world. I encounter it routinely when somebody is mopey or doesn't want to do their work. In a therapeutic culture, it's a good excuse for calling in sick or skipping church. I hear it sometimes modified like, "I'm not having it today!" This is usually a way to qualify acting like a jerk to someone else or not being patient with someone else's behavior. It's interesting how much we allow our circumstances to dictate our behavior and justify it with these phrases. In a customizable world built around the glorified self, sometimes we're just "not feeling it." Paul's closing thoughts to the Thessalonian church teach the exact opposite. His expectation is that our behavior comes out of our eternal circumstances. He speaks boldly with three phrases in a row:

**Always be joyful.**

**Never stop praying.**

**Be thankful in all circumstances.**

These aren't conditional. Doesn't matter whether you're feeling it or having it today. The passing emotion of a singular day always concedes to the eternal hope of the glorious day. So our character is built around that which we decide daily to set our hearts and minds towards. Paul ends these three phrases with another bold statement we need to hear, "This is God's will for you who belong to Christ." You want to follow God's will for your life? Be joyful. Be prayerful. Be thankful.

## Literary Context

This closing section of Paul's letter feels like scattered thoughts that pop up in his mind, but it is important to see these as coherent blocks of teaching even though they are short. This is especially true in 5:19-22. Paul has been issuing imperatives ("do this"), but switches into a prohibition ("do not do this") when he urges the church, "Do not stifle the Spirit." It is easy to pull that quote out of context and argue over what it means, but Paul clarifies his meaning immediately as he addresses listening and testing prophecy so that the church can "hold on to what is good (and) stay away from every kind of evil." One of the primary roles of God's Spirit in the NT was prophecy. In his commentary, Shogren adopts the Society of Biblical Literature's definition of NT prophecy, which is helpful for us as well, "The early Christian prophet was an immediately-inspired spokesperson for God, the risen Jesus, or the Spirit who received intelligible oracles that he or she felt impelled to deliver to the Christian community or, representing the community, to the general public." Thus, Paul is encouraging the church to not shut down the continued voice of the Spirit but to remain diligent in affirming and testing the prophetic word for goodness. This approach to Spirit filled prophecy continued in the early church beyond the time of the NT. The early Christian work *The Shepherd of Hermas* says, "when the man who has the divine Spirit comes into an assembly of righteous men who have faith in a divine Spirit, and intercession is made to God by the assembly of those men, then the angel of the prophetic spirit which is assigned to him fills the man, and being filled with the Holy Spirit the man speaks to the multitude, just as the Lord wills."

## Historical Background

Paul urges the church, "See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people." God's people are not to be driven by the need for reciprocity or vengeance. This is a unique perspective in world history. Most religions carry some sense of reciprocity. "The good you put into the world will come back to you" or "they got what was due them." Jesus followers view it differently especially in contrast to the Roman world. Gene Green explains well the high view of vengeance in the Roman world, "But all these (Roman) authors recognized that the natural tendency of humans and the culturally accepted way to respond to evil was to avenge oneself. Thucydides, for example, sanctioned it, stating that 'where vengeance follows most closely upon the wrong, it best equals it and most amply requites it' (3.38.1). Seneca commented that vengeance was 'legitimate' (De Ira 2.32.2). In the Roman world, just as in the Greek, avenging oneself for a wrong done was necessary 'because of the humiliation a Roman's prestige suffered, if he showed himself reluctant to respond and retaliate for hostile acts. A Roman, governed by a harsh ethos, simply could not afford to 'turn the other cheek' and expect to maintain his position in society.' The loss of social honor called for vengeance to be extracted in order to reestablish one's place in the community. Sometime before Paul's era, one Roman mother voiced the common and abiding belief in the necessity of vengeance as she counseled her sons, "You will say that it is beautiful to make revenge on your enemies. I consider revenge as important and glorious as anyone, but only if it can be attained without harm to the Republic."

## Text Notes

- 5:14 - "lazy" (Gk. ἄτακτος). This is the only use of this word in all of scripture. It was a word used in social and military contexts to describe people who were disorderly or caused problems. Translating it "lazy" or "undisciplined" is a stretch.
- 5:14 - "timid" (Gk. ὄλγοψυχος). This is the only use of this word in the NT. It is used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of OT) to describe those who are in a humble situation. This teaching for the leaders in the church might be reflective of the reprimand to the shepherds of Israel in Ezek. 34:4, "You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty."
- 5:14 - "weak" (Gk. ἀσθενής). It is uncertain who Paul is referring to as the "weak." It might refer to those who are sick (though Paul would have encouraged prayer instead of help), those who are weak in their faith in regards to food laws (Romans 14:1-12; 15:1; 1 Cor. 8:7-13), or those who are politically weak as in not having any social status.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

If you had to get a tattoo that could only be a two word sentence such as “be kind” or “stay humble,” what two words would you get tattooed?

*Read 1 Thess. 5:12-22*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

As you read through this list of quick hit points on staying faithful, what phrase or line sticks out to you and why?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

1 Thessalonian 5:12-13 deals with the role of leadership in the church. What insight does this passage give us into the role and purpose of leadership in the early church? Scholars debate whether this is referring to formal or informal leadership because we have no clear statement about elders being chosen in Thessalonica and the church is so young when Paul is writing. Do you think the church in Thessalonica already had formal leadership in place? Why or why not?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul concludes this section with a brief teaching on prophecy in 5:19-22. What did prophecy look like in the early church and what role did it play? How did the early church “test” the prophecy?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Do you think we still have prophecy in the church today? If so, what does it look like? How should we also test the prophecy in our current context?

*Until  
Then*

# Until Then

## 1 Thess. 5:23-28

WEEK 9

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

"I'm going to make this happen for you," said the car salesman. He seemed very confident. "If this is the price you want," he continued, "then I'm going to go back there and fight with management till we get it. I'm going to make this happen." We waited with our fussy toddler at his desk while he went to "fight" for us. He must have been putting up a good fight because he was back there for quite a while. He finally came back with a solemn look on his face, "Well I have good news and bad news. The good news is we're going to give the new car to you for the price you want. The bad news is we can't give you what you want for your car." I was disappointed. He seemed so confident he could make it happen but he couldn't. We struggle with this all the time. We make light promises to our children only to break them the next day. We swear we're going to keep the diet and exercise every day but then a holiday comes. We say we're going to be on time from here on out but then we hit the snooze button one too many times. So often in our lives we confidently approach something but then don't have the power, strength, inner fortitude, or conviction to make it happen. Paul reminds the church in Thessalonica that "God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful." This comes on the tail end of his prayer that God will make them blameless when Christ returns. Now he assures them, "God will make this happen." There is only one who has ever perfectly kept every promise he has made. There is only one who makes it happen every single time. God alone. This is no scheme or negotiation. This is our faithful God who raised his own son from the dead assuring us that he will do it again!

### SUMMARY

Paul brings his first letter to the Thessalonian Christians to a close with a standard Roman and Hebrew benediction and greeting. He also concludes the letter by referencing again the two primary themes found throughout the letter. First, Paul touches again on the theme of family which has dominated his teaching throughout the letter. He uses the term "brothers and sisters" (Gk. adelphos) three verses in a row (5:25, 26, 27). In the same way, he encourages them to greet each other with a holy kiss which is also a reference to how family greeted one another in the first century (see notes on backside). Second, these family references come on the heal of his beautiful prayer that God will completely sanctify them so that they are blameless at the return of Jesus. Just as the return of Jesus has been a dominant theme throughout the letter, he returns to it again in his closing. The closing of the letter summarizes well the entire goal of the letter. As Shogren concludes, "The goal of the Thessalonian church family is eschatologically oriented: to be holy, together, at Christ's appearing."

### MEMORY VERSE

Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:23

## **Literary Context**

Paul uses the phrase “spirit, soul, and body” to refer to the whole of a person. It is not just one element or area of our life that God wants to completely sanctify. Instead, he is sanctifying all of us. It was heavily debated in the schools of Greek philosophy at the time whether a human was two or three parts. Some argued that humans were soul and body. At the same time, others argued that humans were something like mind, soul, and body. In either circumstance, the concept is the same that we wrestle with today. Are we body and soul? Or are we mind, body, and soul? Where does our spirit play into all of this? The contemporary question that is often heard in Christian circles points to this dichotomy. Are we bodies with a soul? Or are we souls with a body? Most people using this phrase usually point to the latter. That is not Paul's thinking on the matter. Much like his Jewish predecessors, Paul holds an anthropology that sees humans as one unified being: spirit, soul, and body. He is echoing Jesus himself who teaches that the greatest command is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. We should take great delight in knowing that God loves all of who we are, not just one aspect of us. He has gone to great lengths to sanctify all of us. In some mysterious way, that is probably beyond the comprehension of our temporal being we will be found blameless before God in our spirit, soul, and body only because Jesus offered the blameless sacrifice of his whole spirit, soul, and body in the crucifixion. His redemption is a total redemption of all that we are.

## **Historical Background**

Paul commands the believers to have the letter read aloud to all members of God's family in Thessalonica. When the modern reader engages with scripture we do it from the perspective of a culture that is predominantly literate. So we always think about reading scripture, but in the first century, most people were illiterate or only functionally literate. So most people took in a letter because someone else read it to them. Receiving a letter would have been a big deal in the first century. A letter was not stamped and put in the mail as it is today. Instead, it would have been sent by hand with a delegate who was responsible for the reading of the letter and answering any questions the letter might provoke. Paul's demand that the letter be read to the whole church reminded them that no one is excluded from the grace and ministry of God. Whether you came to Jesus as a prominent political official who routinely read edicts to large crowds or an illiterate servant who routinely washed feet, you have the same value and meaning in the kingdom of God.

## **Historical Background**

Paul encourages the church to greet one another “with a holy kiss.” In the ancient world, kissing was not used to display romantic affection. Actually, kissing was an uncommon practice as Shogren points out, “Kissing was hardly normal within the Greco-Roman context. Kissing was a family matter, yet even between married couples, public displays of affection were considered gauche. Within Judaism, kissing was reserved for family members but was hardly common... For members of a congregation to kiss one other was not simply a show of affection; it was the affirmation that the church is the true family.” This religious sign of greeting did gain steam and was widely practiced for centuries in the early church. Later Christian writings suggest that it was either a kiss upon the cheek among mutuals or a kiss upon the forehead for children. By the third century the “holy kiss” between men and women was beginning to cause problems as the Apostolic Constitutions teaches, “then let the men give the men, and the women give the women, the Lord's kiss.” Despite the churches push away from the “holy kiss” it should be remembered with a sense of unity among those who came from far different social and economic backgrounds into the family of God.

## **Text Notes**

- 5:27 - “order” - (Gk. ὅρκίζω). This uncommon word is used only three times in the NT. It carries with it the sense of an oath and originates from the Hebrew concept of placing your hand upon another persons thigh and making a promise. Paul is not just encouraging them to read the letter to everyone. He is charging them with an oath to assure that this letter was fully and widely heard.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

Who gives the best hugs? Why are they so good?

**Read 1 Thess. 5:23-28**

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul prays that the God of peace will keep their whole *spirit and soul and body* blameless when the Lord comes. What is the connection between peace and wholeness? Where do you see in the rest of scripture a connection between peace and wholeness?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Paul emphasizes that we will be kept *blameless* when Jesus returns. Let's start with the opposite as we reflect on this idea. What can we be blamed for both as personal individuals and as collective humanity? What does it take then for us to be blameless when Christ returns?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

We have now read through all of 1 Thessalonians. Take some time and briefly skim back through this letter.

What were some of your major takeaways from this letter?

If someone asked you, "what is 1 Thessalonians about?" How would you respond?

In what ways were you encouraged from this letter?

In what ways were you convicted by this letter?

**Until  
Then**

# Until Then

## 2 Thess. 1:1-12

WEEK 10

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

One of the most important things I've done in my life is naming my children. A lot of people fret and worry about it, but that was not our experience. For all three of our children, my wife and I settled on names in a 10-minute conversation. Granted there were hours of researching and thinking before the final decision was made in that short amount of time. When we were thinking about names we first started with what sounded good with our last name. Then how would their name hold up over a lifetime? Finally, what would their name say not only about them but for them, for who we wanted them to be? As much importance as we place upon naming in our culture, it is nothing like the importance of a name in the first-century Greco-Roman world. In that time your name represented your status and your family. It represented your fundamental character, but most of all it represented your honor. Gene Green points out in his commentary, "The name of a person in that era was much more than a way to distinguish him or her from others. The name often became a symbol of all that a person was, his or her qualities and power, and revealed that person's fundamental character. For that reason, the name was intimately linked with a person's reputation and honor, much as we would speak about a person's "good name" or "bad name." This is why Paul prays in 1:12 that "the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored." How then does the name of Jesus receive this honor? Paul teaches that it is honored "because of the way you live." Our lives as Christians bring honor to the name of Jesus. I don't want my children to bring honor to the name I picked for them. Instead, I want them to bring glory to the name above all names, Jesus.

### SUMMARY

After his standard welcome in verses 1-2, Paul moves into his customary Thanksgiving for the believers which is found in nearly all of his letters. In his wonderful commentary Shogren summarizes this thanksgiving with three "C" words. Paul **commends** the church for continuing to grow in the midst of persecution (3-4). Second, he **comforts** the church by encouraging them that the judgment is still to come (5-10). In the final judgment, those who have persecuted the Christians will be cut off from God eternally. Finally, he **challenges** them to live up to their calling and election in Christ. Interestingly enough, all of verses 3-12 consist of only two sentences in the original Greek. Though Paul is known for occasionally being quite long-winded, this passage is exceptional in its character. Specifically verses 3-10 are one long sentence which Dunham refers to as "having a structure that leaves one gasping for grammatical oxygen." The style of writing is intentional as Paul wants to set the tone for the rest of the letter with a sense of urgency and breathlessness. Though it hasn't been long since he wrote to them, these recurring challenges urge him to write again.

### MEMORY VERSE

So we keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of his call. May he give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do.

2 THESSALONIANS 1:11

## **Literary Context**

There are two ways the opening (1:1-2) to Paul's second letter to the Thessalonian differs from his first letter. Both are minor but worth taking a look at. First, Paul refers to God as "our Father" whereas in the first letter he simply refers to him as God the Father. This might be a minor coincidental change but it's important to at least draw attention to the important concept of God as our Father. In view of the capricious and aloof nature of the Greek deities, Paul teaching non-Jewish believers about a God who longs to be in relationship with them like a father is in relationship with his children would have been remarkable. Just as Paul emphasized the importance of God's family in his first letter so he continues this theme immediately in the second. Second, he includes the line "from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" in his salutation to the church. This builds upon his customary greeting of grace and peace. He accentuates that all grace and peace come from God.

## **Literary Context**

Just as Paul left off in his previous letter, he continues his teaching on the return of Jesus. Whereas in the last letter he referred to it as the "parousia" or "return" of Jesus, in this letter he refers to it as the "revelation" which is the Greek word "apocalypse." He gives three insights into what will happen at that time. First, Jesus will return with the powerful angel army in "flaming fire." Second, he will bring justice by paying back those who have persecuted the church and rejected his Good News. This justice looks like eternal separation from God in destruction. Third, he will receive the honor due him from all "his holy people." There is no doubt that Paul is reflecting on Isaiah 66:15-24 in this passage.

## **Historical Background**

We don't know much about the time in between Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians. It appears that there is not much time between the letters as Paul addresses the same issues with a greater sense of urgency. He also references a previous letter in 2:15. Most likely, he is writing again from Corinth while still on his second missionary journey just months after his first letter.

## **Historical Background**

Just as 1 Thessalonians gave specific attention to the role of suffering in a Christians life, Paul immediately returns to this teaching in 1:4-6. The Christian perspective on suffering is unique for the Thessalonians as Gene Green points out in his commentary, "In the city of Thessalonica, the Christians had suffered rejection and dishonor at the hands of their contemporaries (1 Thess. 2.14), but in the plan of God the source of social shame is transformed into a sign of honor. God counts them worthy of the kingdom of God (Luke 20.35; Acts 5.41), and their sufferings are a mark of that dignity. Just as a person had to be "counted worthy" in order to become a citizen of the great city Alexandria in Egypt (3 Macc. 3.21), so these believers are counted worthy of the kingdom of God because of their suffering. So intimate is the relationship between the kingdom of God and the suffering of the people of God that Paul included the teaching that "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14.22) as part of his basic instruction of new Christians."

## **Text Notes**

- 1:3 - "We can't help" (Gk. ὀφείλω). Literally, "we ought." This word carries with it a sense of indebtedness or obligation. This was standard Jewish language for the burden of prayer for another person. Paul is contending that he has no choice but to pray always for the Thessalonian Christians.
- 1:3 - "flourishing" (Gk. ὑπεραυξάνω). This is the only use of this word in the NT. It is an intensive contraction where the root verb "grow" is modified by the prefix "uper" which means to abound. It's not just that their faith and love is growing but that it is abounding in growth.
- 1:5 - "to show" (Gk. ἔνδειγμα). Again, this is the only use of this word in the NT. It literally means "proof or evidence." The root comes from the concept of pointing out something with your finger.
- 1:9 - "destruction" (Gk. ὅλεθρος). This word for destruction is only used four times in the NT and all occurrences are by Paul (1 Co 5:5; 1 Thess 5:3; 1 Ti 6:9). It literally means "that which causes death or ruin."

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

Have you ever had a pen pal? Who were they and how did it happen?

## *Read 2 Thess. 1:1-12*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

When you read through Paul's opening to 2 Thessalonians what sticks out to you? Why does it catch your attention? Based upon what you've read, what do you expect Paul to talk about in the rest of the letter?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-13 as a group. Compare and contrast Paul's opening in 1 Thessalonians with his opening in 2 Thessalonians. How are they the same and how do they differ? What does this teach us?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 is all one sentence in the original Greek. Can anyone read it all in one breath? Why do you think Paul writes this all as one long sentence?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Undoubtedly, Isaiah 66 is the backdrop to the opening to this letter. Read through Isaiah 66. What connections do you find between these two passages?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Paul uses some very honest and difficult language about what will happen to those who have opposed the Good News and have persecuted the church. How do we display grace and love for those who have rejected Christ while still holding tight to this picture of what awaits them eternally?

*Until  
Then*

# Until Then

## 2 Thess. 2:1-12

WEEK 11

### SUMMARY

This passage is widely regarded as one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament to understand and interpret. The difficulty comes in three different ways. First, we don't have a lot of other scriptures to give us guidance in the New Testament on the concept of the apostasy or man of lawlessness. Second, Paul specifically refers to his previous teaching. He provided the church in Thessalonica with specific teaching on these issues and asks them to remember that teaching. The problem of course is that we weren't present for that teaching. So we are trying to ascertain from contextual clues what Paul originally taught. Third, this passage alludes to imagery and metaphors common in a style of Jewish literature called "apocalyptic." Though this was a well-known and well-used style of literature for first-century Jews, the modern reader is mostly unaware of it (see the notes on the backside.) That being said, the passage can be summarized as Paul comforting the church in Thessalonica. They haven't missed the day of the Lord as some have falsely taught and have all the knowledge to properly understand this day when the time comes. There will be condemnation for those who follow the man of lawlessness in God's timing.

### MEMORY VERSE

The Lord Jesus will slay him with  
the breath of his mouth and  
destroy him by the splendor of his  
coming.

2 THESSALONIANS 2:8

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

One of the lessons parents strive to teach children is how to use their "inside voice." This is an important aspect of growing up and being contextually aware. During a very noisy weekend recently, I found myself sitting outside on my porch, enjoying a little quiet time until our kindergartner came outside screaming excitedly and joyfully. I immediately reprimanded him and said, "Use your inside voice!"

He astutely responded, "But I'm outside!"

He was right but I was also right. There are times we must learn to be loud and there are times we must learn to whisper. Wiema in his wonderful commentary on Paul's letters to the Thessalonians gives some similar advice that is useful for us today, "The difficulty of this passage drives home the important principle of "shouting" where Scripture demands that one should shout but "whispering" where Scripture demands that one should whisper. In other words, there are many subjects that the Bible addresses frequently and with great clarity, and these are the things that the exegete [reader] ought to shout."

His advice is wise for us today. As Christians we tend to fight, argue, and shout about obscure and difficult concepts in Scripture. It might be wise for us to learn how to use our "inside voice."

## Literary Context

Paul uses imagery and themes in this passage which come from a specific type of Jewish literature referred to as “apocalyptic.” The word “apocalyptic” means “revelation” or “unveiling.” Jewish Apocalyptic literature is a genre of writing defined by elaborate and fantastical imagery used allegorically to describe both present and future events. It is often concerned with the Day of the Lord and was a way for Jewish authors to provoke Jewish revivals in secrecy when under the rule of a domineering empire. It first appears in the latter prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah but is more fully developed in the writings of the second temple such as the end of Daniel and the NT book of Revelation. It spans roughly from 200 BC to AD 200 and includes non-canonical writings such as 1 and 2 Enoch, Baruch II, 4 Ezra (2 Esdras), the Assumption of Moses, Jubilees, the Ascension of Isaiah, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.

## Historical Background

Paul reassures the church that the day of the Lord will not come until two events have taken place: the great rebellion or apostasy takes place and the man of lawlessness is revealed.

### The Apostasy

Unfortunately for us, Paul does not give any other teaching on the apostasy as he assumes his readers know all about it from his time teaching there. We would like to know what the apostasy is (is it political, religious, spiritual?) and who it involves, but we genuinely know little else about it. Paul never again uses this word as a noun and only three times uses it as a verb (none of which are helpful: 2 Cor. 12:8; 1 Tim. 4:1, 2 Tim. 2:19). In secular Greek writings the term is often used to describe a political rebellion. Yet, in the Septuagint, it is most often used in a religious sense to refer to a rebellion against God’s law. Other NT passages commonly refer to the Day of the Lord being marked by some form of opposition to God and general wickedness (1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 3:1-9; Matt. 24:11-24; Mark 13:3-23; 2 Pet. 3:3-4; Jude 17-18). It seems most likely that Paul is referring to some kind of religious rebellion against God which denies the Gospel, leads to the worship of a “pseudo-god,” and ends in condemnation.

### The Man of Lawlessness

Paul refers to a man of lawlessness or sin. This figure is difficult to understand on so many levels. Before anything else, there is a “textual variant” present here. This means that there are differences in the ancient manuscripts over what is written. Some have “man of sin” while others have “man of lawlessness.” The weight of the evidence leans towards a reading of “man of lawlessness” as there is earlier support and it ties in better with v. 7-8 in which lawlessness is referred to twice. This difficulty continues for the modern reader as the phrase involves a Semitic idiom using a generic personal pronoun with a depictive adjective (“man of...”). Paul is undoubtedly leaning on the prophetic imagery of the Apocalyptic Prophecy of Daniel who presents a figure of lawlessness that attempts to establish his own reign in the Jerusalem temple. This prophecy finds its first fulfillment through Antiochus IV who built an altar to Zeus in the Temple in 167 BC but the theme recurs with Pompey in 63 BC and even Caligula in AD 40. The title might even specifically refer to Daniel 12:10, “and the lawless ones shall be lawless and the lawless ones will not understand but the wise ones shall understand” (LXX, translation mine). Paul does give us more insight into the man of lawlessness than the apostasy. He is not Satan but works for Satan. He is able to perform signs and miracles. He will establish himself in the temple and claim to be God. Yet, his ultimate destiny derives from his ultimate character: destruction.

## Text Notes

- 2:2 – “spiritual vision, a revelation, or a letter.” Paul lists three possibilities for the source of the rumors concerning the return of Jesus. Like all church rumors, it is unclear where the rumor truly came from and where it started.
- 2:2 – “already begun” (Gk. ἐνέστηκεν). This word means to be present or to come. The issue around this verb doesn’t concern its root meaning but rather its tense. There is great debate over whether it should be translated, as “the day of the Lord has come” or “the day of the Lord is about to come (at hand).” The weight of the arguments leans towards the first interpretation though the theological weight leans towards the latter.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

What is your favorite Fantasy Fiction book or movie?

*Read 2 Thess. 2:1-12*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Why does Paul write this second letter to the Thessalonians? What issue or issues is he trying to address? How do these issues relate to the issues that were prevalent in First Thessalonians?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul gives us some teaching around the “man of lawlessness” in this passage. How does Paul describe him? What do we know will happen to him? What is his relationship to Satan?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

As this passage reveals, for thousands of years Christians have been fascinated with learning more about the day of the Lord. As Christians, why do you think it is so easy for us to become obsessed with “end times” theology? What is a healthy way of thinking and interacting with “end times” theology in our churches?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Paul says, “God will cause them to be greatly deceived, and they will believe these lies. Then they will be condemned for enjoying evil rather than believing the truth.” How do you reconcile this statement about God with our knowledge that God is abundantly merciful and wants every person to come to eternal life?

*Until  
Then*

# Until Then

## 2 Thess. 2:13-3:5

WEEK 12

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

As we are drawing to the end of reading through Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, I'm processing my takeaways from these letters. Especially interesting to me is that these are his earliest letters and demonstrate his pastoral heart and missional zeal. It hasn't been that long since he was in Thessalonica establishing the church and these are first-generation Christian problems that he is addressing. Paul writes in response to the initial difficulties these baby Christians are having as they transition out of their previous life, whether Jewish or Greek. One of my first takeaways is that Paul teaches the Gospel is centered in the justice and faithfulness of God. It is not that God's grace and mercy don't trump his justice, but rather that his grace and mercy prevail out of his justice. God gives us what we are striving to attain. If we are seeking after God, trying to promote his love, and share the good news of his Son then he secures us in his love and goodness. If we are striving to be faithful, even in our failures, he is faithful to us and he never fails. Yet, on the other hand, if we reject his good news and set our hearts towards the destruction of others for the sake of our good, then we will find the destruction we seek. Those who choose to persecute will know persecution. Those who choose wrath and violence will receive the wrath and violence they have chosen. This is all over both of his letters to the Thessalonians and it gives me pause both in its weight and in its simplicity. I recognize that those who choose destruction will receive destruction eternally. That is heavy in my mind and heart. Yet I also find great comfort in knowing that striving after God despite my imperfections will be rewarded by the God who has strived after me through the grace, faith, and salvation of our Lord Jesus.

### SUMMARY

Though many translations give a paragraph break or heading between v. 12 & v. 13, there should not be any break. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 should be read as one coherent thought. This is clearly evident as Paul returns in v. 15 to the reason he is writing as first established in v. 2. Paul is writing to refute false teachings that were supposedly given from him in a vision, revelation, or letter (2:2), but he urges the believers to "keep a strong grip on the teaching we passed on to you both in person and by letter." This is important because Paul's teaching on the return of Christ does not end on the low note of the eternal destruction of the wicked as found in v.12. Instead, it ends with an encouragement for the church to remember their salvation and share in the glory of Christ's return. Thus, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 should be read as one coherent block of teaching where Paul addresses the false teaching that Jesus has already returned. He begins to close his letter in 3:1-5 with a petition for the church to be prayerful for the ministry of Paul, Silas, and Timothy as they spread the Good News of Jesus in tumultuous places. In this section, he continues to accentuate one of his primary themes throughout both letters: patient endurance until Christ returns.

### MEMORY VERSE

May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ.

2 THESSALONIANS 3:5

## Literary Context

There is a difficult textual variant (manuscripts vary on what is written) in v. 13. The NLT translates, "God chose you to be among the first to experience salvation." The issue surrounds the word "first." A single Greek letter differs in the manuscripts which alters the meaning between "first" to "first-fruit." It's more likely that the reading should be first-fruit for five reasons that Weima summarizes well in his commentary. "First, Paul nowhere else uses the exact phrase "from the beginning" and so is unlikely to be doing so here. Second, when the apostle wants to express the idea of something going back to the very beginning of time, he uses different prepositional phrases than "from the beginning" (1 Cor. 2:7, "before the ages"; Col. 1:26, "from the ages"; Eph. 1:4, "before the foundation of the earth"; 2 Tim. 1:9, "before the times of the ages"). Third, Paul normally uses the noun *archē* with the meaning "ruler, authority" (Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15; Titus 3:1) and only rarely with the temporal sense of "beginning" (Col. 1:18, which may be part of a hymn; Phil. 4:15). Fourth, the term "firstfruits" is a Pauline word that occurs in his other writings six times (Rom. 8:23; 11:16; 16:5; 1 Cor. 15:20, 23; 16:15)... Fifth, there are two instances where copyists apparently took offense at the original reading "first fruits" and substituted it with "from the beginning," even though this latter "corrected" reading did not fit the context (Rom. 16:5... Rev. 14:4.)" The passage makes much more sense with this interpretation. Paul is reminding the young believers in Christ that God is just beginning his work in Thessalonica with their faithfulness. Of course, the concept of first fruits has a long biblical history. The Israelites were commanded to offer to God the first fruits of their harvest (Ex 23:16; Neh 10:35), which included olive oil, wine, wool, fruit, herds, flocks, et al. One of the three major Jewish festivals was dedicated to the collection of the first fruits. This holiday called "Ingatherings," "Weeks," or Pentecost" was used to mark the harvest season in a primarily agricultural society. The nation of Israel itself is referred to as the first fruits of God's harvest (Jer. 2:3). Similarly, Paul describes the Holy Spirit as the first fruit in Romans 8 and Jesus as the first fruit from among the dead in 1 Corinthians 15.

## Historical Background

Modern interpretations miss Paul's important metaphor in 3:1, "the Lord's message will spread rapidly and be honored where it goes." He uses two Greek words "trexo" and "doxazeteo." These two words were well-known metaphors used to describe a runner competing in the Ancient Olympic Games. They run ("trexo") to receive honor ("doxazeteo"). The word for honor might also be understood as fame. Paul uses this metaphor of an Olympic athlete running in the games often (1 Cor. 9:24; Gal. 2:2; Phil 2:16), but his usage is different here. Whereas in the other passages it is Paul himself or the church that is running the race, in this present context it is the Word of the Lord. As Beale concludes, "The portrayal here is not of Paul "running the race" of the Christian life to win the prize of salvation (as elsewhere) but of the gospel itself running for the prize, namely, victory over people's hearts and over false religions and philosophies that have competed with the gospel and formerly held pagans in their grasp. God will demonstrate at the end of time that the gospel of Christ is the true "winner" against all competing worldviews and thus is the only true religion and philosophy."

## Text Notes

- 3:1 - "the Lord's Message" (Gk. ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου). Literally, "the word of the Lord." This exact phrase only occurs in one other place, which happens to also be in the Thessalonian correspondence (1 Thess. 1:8). Most often Paul uses simply "Word" or "Word of God." It is unclear if the phrase should be translated as "the word about the Lord" or "the word that comes from the Lord." It appears in this early letter Paul is adopting the OT phrase "word of the Lord" which occurs over 250 times.
- 3:2 - "not everyone is a believer" (Gk. οὐδὲ πάντων ἡ πίστις). Literally, "for not all have faith." This is an understatement that is supposed to catch the reader's attention with its sparse brevity. Paul immediately contrasts this statement with his following statement, "But the Lord is faithful." In Greek, the following statement begins with the adjective for faith so that the text literally says, "Not all have faith, faith is of the Lord."

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

What is your favorite thing to eat straight from a garden or orchard?

What makes it so good?

## *Read 2 Thess. 2:13-3:5*

### SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul describes the Thessalonian Christians as the “first fruits” in 2:13. Why does he call them that? What role do they have as the first fruits? What is the biblical background to the concept of a first fruit? How does being called “first fruits” comfort the Thessalonians in their sufferings?

### SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul writes, “now you can share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (NLT). When you reflect on Paul’s writings to the Thessalonians or really on any scripture how do you see Jesus sharing his glory with us? What does this teach us about his glory? How does it compare to the way people think about glory in our fallen world?

### DISCUSSION QUESTION

Paul contrasts the lack of faith of unbelievers with the faithfulness of God. In our world today, where do you see a lack of faithfulness and integrity? How does that make you feel? In contrast, in our world today where do you see affirmation of God’s faithfulness?

### DISCUSSION QUESTION

This passage is loaded with a ton of language describing what God has done and is doing. Which one of these descriptions of God’s work is specifically meaningful for you in your present circumstances? Why is it so meaningful?

*Until  
Then*

# Until Then

## 2 Thess. 3:6-18

WEEK 13

### DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

My first real job was at a pool store. I was the shop helper in charge of keeping the building clean, supplying items, checking out customers, and carrying out supplies. It was a great job for learning customer service. I was well-liked by my boss. I remember the first time I got in trouble though. It was the first hot day of the season and nearly everyone was opening up their pool. I had carried countless buckets of chlorine and put it in the back of people's trunks. I was flat worn out. The day was winding down and with about half an hour left to go, I was standing behind the cashier station waiting for a couple of lingering customers when I heard my boss tap on the window and call me into her office. She sternly addressed me, "I don't ever want to see you standing around with your hands in your pockets again." As I was standing there waiting, I tucked my hands into my pockets. That was a no-go for her. She continued, "If your hands are in your pockets that means you have nothing to do and we always have something to do. Lazy hands reflect a lazy worker." Honestly, I just wanted to roll my eyes at her. I was exhausted. If I had proven nothing else that day it was that I was a hard worker. Yet, here I was being reprimanded for looking lazy. Yet, she was teaching me something important. My work wasn't done for the day. Whether I was tired or not didn't matter, what mattered was working hard to the finish. Paul has this wonderful line to end his second letter to the Thessalonians. After a long section of warning them against idleness. He encourages them to "never tire of doing good!" It's a good reminder for us today as well. Too often we have our hands in our pockets as Christians waiting around for someone else to do the work God has called us to. We are over-committed or too tired. Yet, Paul's words encourage us still today. We should never tire of doing good.

### SUMMARY

Paul's second and final letter (that we have) draws to a close in chapter 3 with the standard elements of a letter closing like prayer, greeting, and a validating signature. Yet, before that he returns to one of the primary themes found in both of his letters: warning against idleness or laziness. Paul first gently introduced the issue in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, "Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands, just as we instructed you before." Yet, by the time he writes again he is much more concerned with the issue and addresses it assertively, "We give you this command in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." His warning continues even more firmly, not only is the church to avoid idleness but they are to "stay away from all believers who live idle lives." Paul then returns to another of his primary themes by encouraging them to "imitate us." Once again, Paul provides an example for the new believers to follow. Rather than being lazy busybodies, Paul challenges them to imitate himself and his coworkers who worked hard among the Thessalonians. Though Paul and his fellow workers could have rightfully lived dependently upon the Thessalonians, they chose instead to work hard as an example to the young believers. Just as he concludes, "Those unwilling to work will not get to eat."

### MEMORY VERSE

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you his peace at all times and in every situation. The Lord be with you all.

2 THESSALONIANS 3:16

## Literary Context

Paul closes his letter with another affirmation that the Thessalonians Christians should “imitate” himself and his coworkers rather than those who are lazy, busybodies among them. Although seldom appreciated, imitation is one of the major themes of the Thessalonian correspondence. Weima points to three considerations that should be taken into account when understanding Paul’s theology of imitation. First, it seems slightly uncomfortable for the modern reader steeped in the “make your own path” individualism of the contemporary Western world, but imitation was a virtue in the Roman world. Weima shares a wonderful quote from the Roman philosopher Seneca, “[Imitation] will help you more than the written word. You must go to the scene of action, first, because men put more faith in their eyes than in their ears; and second, because the way is long if one follows precepts but short and helpful if one follows examples” (Ep. 6.5–6). It was commonplace in the Roman world to practice imitation. Paul accentuates the importance of imitating the right people. Second, Paul calls on his audience to imitate him only because he is imitating Christ (see also 1 Cor. 11:1). Third, Weima points out that Paul is using an “effective teaching strategy” by “presenting himself as a model to be imitated.” Rather than just giving oral instruction, Paul provides a model that the new believers can look to and imitate. He provides both classroom instruction and real-life experience.

## Historical Background

Scholars offer two different reasons why Paul had to again address disorderly conduct stemming from laziness and gossip in the Thessalonian church. First, it is possible that some members of the church have ceased working because they believe that Jesus has either already returned or that his return has begun. You can imagine much like a person winning a lottery and not going to work the next day that if some new Christians believe that King Jesus is amid his return where he will fully establish his kingdom they do not need to show up for work the next day. This has been the traditional position held for a long time, but recent scholarship has suggested a different reason. Contemporary scholars contend that the idleness in the church doesn’t stem from Jesus’ immanent return but from an abuse of the client/Patreon dynamic of the Roman world. In a culture based on honor and shame, many clients were dependent on uberwealthy and powerful Patrons for their well-being. The clients would work to ensure the honor of their Patron. Yet, now as they have taken on Jesus as the exclusive Patron they refuse to work any longer for the honor of another worldly Patron. In either case, the issue is more than slight division or busybodies in the church, it is a matter of Gospel concern as Beale points out in his commentary, “One can see how a significant group of believers not working would be an impediment to the advancement of the gospel, since even most of unbelieving society in Thessalonica worked to support themselves. Thessalonian culture would have considered people who refused to work ethically deficient. The point is that the actions of Christians should be ethically attractive to others and should result in being a good witness for Christ to the unbelieving world, so “that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored.”

## Text Notes

- 3:6, 11 - “idle” (Gk. ἀτάκτως). Literally, “disorderly.” This form of the word is only used in these two occurrences throughout the NT. Yet, it shares the root word of ataktos, which Paul used in 1 Thess. 5:14. This was a military term meaning “disorderly” or “distracting.” Though laziness might be within the range of meanings, it carries more of a sense of causing chaos.
- 3:11 - “meddling in other people’s business” (Gk. περιεργάζομένους). This whole phrase in English is one word in the Greek. Paul uses a masterful play of words with the word for work which is *ergazomai*. Four times in this passage he urges the Thessalonians to work hard (Gk. *ergazomai*) and finally says that the only thing he hears that they are doing is *peri-ergazomai* or “working in other people business.”

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## OPENING QUESTION

What is your favorite job to do? Could be house work, career work, etc.

What is one job you just genuinely enjoy?

## *Read 2 Thess. 3:6-18*

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Paul addresses issues of laziness and disorderliness in this week's reading. The notes suggest two possible reasons that he addresses this issue. What are they? Which one do you think seems more likely and why?

## SCRIPTURE QUESTION

Twice in this passage, Paul gives a clear command for the Thessalonian Christians to "stay away" from certain people. What are these two instances and who does he warn against? Do you think there are groups of people still today that we should "stay away" from? Why or why not?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

As we close out Second Thessalonians, in what ways do you find your life similar or different than the lives of the Thessalonian Christians? What teaching in this final reading do you find especially helpful in your life today?

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

We have now finished all of Paul's correspondence to the Thessalonians. Take a couple of minutes to just skim back through First and Second Thessalonians. What were your major takeaways from these letters? What did you learn from this study? If someone asked you what are the Thessalonians letters about, how would you summarize them?

*Until  
Then*