

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

Central Focus Small Group Studies 2002

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1 Thessalonians 1:1-9

AIM

- To understand Paul's confidence in and thankfulness for the work God has done amongst the Thessalonians.

CONTEXT

- Having been driven out of Philippi by opponents to the gospel, Paul, Timothy and Silas arrive at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1), capital of the Roman Province and one of the largest cities in Macedonia in the northern part of modern Greece. Paul preaches Jesus as the Christ (Acts 17:3-5) and within three weeks a Christian community is formed from amongst both Jews and Gentiles. However not everyone is persuaded. Some Jews are furious at his message and resort to violence to drive them out (Acts 17:5ff). They travel on the Berea but are followed there by their opponents. Paul is again forced to move on (Acts 17:13f), first to Athens (Acts 17:16ff) and then Corinth (Acts 18:1).
- Paul longs to hear how the new Thessalonian converts are getting on. In Athens and unable to visit them himself (1 Thess 2:18) he sends Timothy (1 Thess 3:2) who later joins him in Corinth (Acts 18:5) with news of them. 1 Thessalonians is Paul's response to Timothy's report. There is much to be thankful for (1 Thess 1:2ff) but there are also some causes of concern.
- Both I and II Thessalonians are amongst the first of the NT documents to be written (Galatians possibly predates 1 Thessalonians by a few months) and the similarity in language and content of 2 Thess to 1 Thess suggest that it was written not long afterwards.

STRUCTURE

- 1:1 Introduction
- 1:2-3 Paul's thankfulness
- 1:4-10 Power Evangelism

PAUL'S THANKFULNESS

Paul knew that the Thessalonians would face great trials and persecutions (3:2-4) and was worried that it would unsettle them. He wanted to return to Thessalonica and support and encourage them but was forced to send Timothy (3:5). When he heard that they were standing firm he was filled with joy (3:7-8) and overflowing in thankfulness (3:9), a thankfulness he expresses in the opening words of the letter (1:2-3) and continued throughout (1 Thess 2:13, 3:9; 2 Thess 1:3, 2:13).

Paul makes a point of saying that he thanks God for *all* of them (1:2). The mention of everyone in the congregation at both the beginning and end of the letter (1:2, 5:27) suggests that he has heard of some tensions amongst them (cf 5:12-14).

POWER EVANGELISM

Paul's thankfulness is directed towards God for the work He has accomplished amongst them (1:2). His power at work is witnessed by their:

- turning away from idols to serve the living and true God (1:9)
- patiently waiting for the return of the resurrected Christ (1:10)
- their persevering endurance in the face of trials and opposition (1:3b).
- trusting in Jesus to rescue them from God's coming judgment (1:10).

All this - a complete turn around for Jew and Gentile alike - had been brought about by Paul's message. The fact that words alone achieved all that was proof that God was at work (1:4).

God the Holy Spirit had worked with power through Paul's words (1:4). This was clear from the fact that they had received them not as the words of a man but as the word of God - which is what they were (2:13). This shows that God had chosen and loved them and assures them of their election because the Spirit has enabled them to trust the gospel (cf 2 Thess 2:13-15).

IMITATORS & EXAMPLES

When the Thessalonians had heard Paul they:

received the message with joy	(1:6)
turned to God from idols	(1:9)
began to serve God	(1:9)
looked forward to Christ's return (1:10) to rescue them from God's future judgment (1:10)	

Paul had lived and worked amongst the Thessalonians, enduring hardship for their sake (1:5b, 2:9). In doing this he was following Christ's example. Now the Thessalonians were following after him (1:6), their faith characterised by an active 'other person centredness' that endured present trials by looking to the future and Christ's return (1:3, 6, 10). They in turn had thus become a model for others (1:7)

That they had continued to rejoice in the gospel despite severe opposition was:

- a testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit (1:6)
- a testimony to their faith in Christ (1:8-9)
- to some extent as a guarantor of the genuineness of Paul's message and ministry (cf 2:19), a theme he will now go on to develop (cf ch 2).

THE ASSURANCE OF FAITH

Why does Paul start his letter to the Thessalonians like this? It seems likely that although the Thessalonians had stood firm after Paul left there is emerging division (see hints in 1:2, 3:12, 5:12-14, 27) with some tempted by the trials they were facing not longer impressed by Paul and his gospel (cf 2:1ff). We know for certain that a group of Jews in Thessalonica were infuriated by his message that Jesus was the Christ and attacked the message of the gospel by attacking the messenger (cf Acts 17:5-8, 13). It is likely that they continued to slander him once he had left, which (cf 2:1ff).

Paul therefore opens his correspondence by assuring them that their faith was genuine and their election certain (1:4-10), before defending his ministry amongst them (ch 2) and exhorting them to keep going (ch 4-5). He is confident of the God's work in them through the preaching of the gospel - as witnessed in their response - and wants them continue as they have begun (cf 1:2-3 & 3:12-13).

THINKING IT THROUGH ...

How should Paul's confidence in and thankfulness for the work God has done amongst the Thessalonians effect our attitude to ourselves and others?

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

AIM

- To appreciate the character of the apostle's ministry amongst the Thessalonians and why it was being called into question.
- To think through the implications of Paul's defence of his ministry for those we are involved in.

CONTEXT

- Paul was forced to leave the newly founded church at Thessalonica after only 3 weeks (Acts 17:1-9) and had longed to return ever since. So far he has been prevented from so doing (2:17, 3:11). Desperate to hear news of how they are doing, and worried that they may have succumbed to opposition (3:5), he had sent Timothy to them (3:1-2, 5). The news he received back was good (3:6). He now writes to them to encourage them to continue as they have begun (3:12-13, cf 1:2-3).
- Although the news from Timothy was generally good it seems as though there were some problems beginning to emerge. At least some of the Thessalonians were beginning to have doubts about Paul and aspects of his ministry (ch 2:1-10). Therefore as he encourages them to persevere he also addresses these areas of concern.

STRUCTURE

Paul's defence of his ministry	2:1-13
Reminders of the Thessalonian response	2:13-16

DOUBTS OVER THE APOSTLES AND THEIR MINISTRY

It is not clear from what quarter these came, but Paul's insistence that he letter be read 'to all the brothers' (5:26) suggests that opposition to Paul was not limited to outsiders. From his defence in 2:1-16 it seems the attacks were directed principally at his motives, methods and results that ensued.

PAUL'S DEFENCE

Paul addresses their concerns by defending their motivation and his methods.

Their motivation was:

Not financial:

Unlike many travelling prophets and soothsayers of the day they were not after money (2:5, 6, 9). Although as apostles they had the right to be supported (2:1, cf 1 Cor 9:3, 12) they worked night and day so as to offer the gospel 'free of charge' to the Thessalonians.

Not self promotion:

They were not bothered with how others might view them (2:4). They hadn't sort to ingratiate themselves to their hearers or pamper to their egos (2:5), but had been honest and open with them (2:5). If people thought ill of them so be it. What mattered was God's verdict not mans (2:4).

But salvation:

They were motivated by a desire to fulfil their responsibility as God's co-workers and those entrusted with the gospel (2:4) to speak it so that people might be saved (2:2, 9b, 16a). They endured opposition, insults and suffering (2:1 etc) with one aim only - the salvation of others (2:16).

Their Methods:

Paul regards himself and his companions as men approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel (2:4). They rejected all fraudulent and deceptive methods of winning people to Christ (3:3, 5) and sort only to fulfil their God given responsibility to tell others the good news of the gospel.

But this was no 'hit and run' evangelism, even though they were only in Thessalonica for three weeks. Their teaching was within the context of relationship. The new believers were very dear to them. As parents to their children (2:7, 11) Paul, Timothy and Silas were delighted to share their lives with them (2:8). The Thessalonians knew from first hand that they were genuine (2:10). ('Surely you remember - cf 2:9 - although here too it is God's verdict on them that matters, not man's - 2:10.) And now having been torn away from them (2:17) they longed to see them, fearful that as such young believers they had become prey to all who those who opposed them (3:5).

The Results:

That this approach was the right one is seen in the response it brought. The Thessalonians had welcomed their message with joy - in spite of severe suffering - and received their words not as the words of mere men but as words of God (2:13). The gospel message was self authenticating a being the words of God. This was powerful witness to God's word at work in them (2:13) by work of the Holy Spirit (1:6) as they had turned from idols to serve the living and true God, awaiting Christ's return (1:9-10).

IMITATING CHRIST'S PEOPLE

If this had been the response to their ministry how could it come to be regarded a failure (2:1)? Because the fellowship in the gospel had resulted in fellowship in suffering (2:14-15a).

Paul's whole ministry was marked by opposition and suffering. He had arrived at Thessalonica only after having been driven out of first Philippi (2:2, Acts 17). And then he was hounded out of Thessalonica and Berea. He had warned the Thessalonians that if they too were to follow Christ they would face similar trials (cf 3:4), and they did (1:6). It is likely that the fact that Paul's gospel always brought opposition and suffering led some to consider both him and his message a failure.

Paul's response is to defend his ministry (2:1-13) and encourage the congregation that such opposition is the norm for God's people. As for Christ and the Prophets so for his people - both in Thessalonica and else where (2:14-15a). God and his messengers have always been opposed. Following a crucified Christ involves carrying a cross, and all those who oppose the God's people will eventually have to give account before Him (2:16).

REMEMBER ... AND KEEP GOING.

Throughout these verses Paul wants to bring to their remembrance his time with them. It was only a matter of months since he had been with them and they knew that what he was saying was true ('you know' - 2:1, 2, 5, 11; 'surely you remember' - 2:9; 'you were witnesses' - 2:10). If they all take stock and remember their time together then the discord that threatened should be nipped in the bud (5:6).

THINKING IT THROUGH ...

- What are the challenges and correctives in these verses to the ministries we are involved in?

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

AIM

- To understand Paul's concern for the Thessalonians - the reason for it and how he address it.

CONTEXT

- Paul is writing to a church that had been quickly established through his ministry He had been forced to leave them after only three weeks or so (Acts 17:2, 10) and has been prevented again and again from returning (2:18). However he has recently heard from Timothy that they were standing firm in the face off opposition (3:6) and so has written to them full of thankfulness and joy in their continuing with the gospel (1:2ff).
- However he has also seen it necessary to defend his ministry amongst them (2:1-12), tell them to outwardly affirm their unity in the gospel (5:25) and insist everyone hears what he has to say (5:27). This suggests that all was not entirely well in Thessalonica.
- Paul longs to visit the church again - he prays night and day that he will be able to (3:12) - in order to encourage them to continue to persevere (3:4) but has been prevented so far from doing so. But that hasn't prevented him from praying for them (1:2: cf 3:10, 12-13, 5:23-24), sending Timothy instead (3:2) or writing to them to encourage them to that end.

STRUCTURE

2:17-20	Paul's passion
3:1-6	Paul's fears
3:7-10	Paul's thankfulness
3-11-13	Paul's prayers

PAUL'S WISH PRAYER ... (3:11-13)

The three prayers of the book - 1:2-3, 3:11-13, 5:23-14 - control the thought of the letter and reflect Paul's overriding concern. He knows that they have been chosen by God (1:4) and that God is both willing and able to keep them Christian to the end but that that doesn't stop him from doing all that he can to strengthen their faith so that they will be found blameless when Christ return (3:13, 5:23).

'THAT THEY INCREASE AND ABOUND IN LOVE' (3:12)

Paul expresses great joy and confidence in their love (12-3) yet he still prays that this love may both continue and increase: love for both one another as well as the outsider (3:12).

He wants their relationships with one another to reflect his relationship with them (3:12b), a relationship of love dominated by a concern that they persevere as believers; a love and concern that issues in both prayer and practical support (3:2, 10 cf 1:2).

WHY? 'SO THAT THEY WILL BE BLAMELESS AND HOLY' (3:13)

- The NIV lets us down rather in 3:12-13 by omitting the 'so that' between the two verses: '...may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all people ... so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints' (3:12-13 NASB).

- Paul commends them for their love three times in the letter (1:3, 3:6, 4:9-10) but he knows that the pressures that they are undergoing from persecutions have the potential to lead to division and selfishness in their midst. So he prays that their love may increase and abound. He wants them to experience an extravagant increase in love even as his love has abounded to them so they all continue to stand firm in the faith (3:8).
- Love for fellow members of the congregation - and beyond that to outsiders (3:12) - is the means by which the individual believer in the congregation is strengthened and thus be found to be persevering in the faith when Christ returns (3:13). A vital consequence of a believer's relationship with Christ and expression of their holiness will be a love for his people. The origin of this love is God (3:12).
- Paul's concern as he writes is that all the Thessalonians believers take their part in building up the body of Christ in love so that they might keep going to the end and attain the perfection of his kingdom together (3:13).

HOW IS THIS TO BE ACHIEVED?

Their love for one another (for which he commends them) stemmed from their faith in Christ that resulted from their hearing the word of God (2:13). They had received Paul's word as the word of God, and it was this word that was at work in them producing the fruit in which Paul rejoiced in (1:2-10, 2:14, 19).

Paul's means of ensuring that they continue to do so - and do so more and more (4:10) - is to make sure that they continue to be taught - if not by himself then by others. He agonises that he cannot do it himself (2:17, 3:10) but in the end would rather himself be deprived of a key companion and co-worker (3:1-2) than leave them vulnerable to those who oppose them.

Meanwhile he prays for them continually (1:2, 3:10) and writes to them. All of this is with one aim : that they keep going as Christians. Strengthening their faith in the gospel by teaching them the gospel is the means by which their faith will be strengthened and their love increase for one another. In this way they will be enabled to stand secure as they await Christ's return 1:10, 3:13).

WHY IS ALL THIS NECESSARY?

Because being a Christian is a life of unceasing struggle against those who would seek to destroy faith in Christ. One thing that every believer can be certain of is that their faith in Christ will come under attack (3:3-4, cf 2:14-15).

Paul had warned the Thessalonians that this would happen (3:3-4). He knew of their suffering and persecution at the hands of those who opposed Christ (2:14) and of how his own efforts to see them again had been frustrated (2:18). He continued to face such opposition in the same way that they did (3:7) and he was concerned that they had not stood firm (3:5).

But although there was no avoiding such opposition there were (and are) ways to both prepare for it and stand up under it by ensuring that everyone is doing everything possible to strengthen one another's faith (3:2, 12-13).

PAUL'S BOAST (2:19)

Were some amongst the Thessalonians beginning to doubt Paul (2:1ff)? After all he had only been with them a short while before 'deserting' them. And he hadn't bothered to come and see how they were getting on (2:18). Had they misjudged him? Was he really bothered about them and their trials?

Paul's passionate concern for them and their standing in Christ overflows in these verses. Perhaps it was the relatively short time he had with them and his inability to share in their trials that makes his words so passionate. His overriding concern is that they are persevering - and will continue to persevere - in the gospel.

They will face opposition - but they will also be victorious (2:19-20). Paul rejoices before God in prayer now that they are standing firm (3:7-9) and looks forward to doing so in person when Christ returns. In the meantime he will and will seek to teach them to be strengthened and encouraged in the faith (4:1ff).

THINKING IT THROUGH ...

How do your ambitions compare with those of Paul? What conclusions do you think an outside observer would come to about your 'hope ..joy ..and crown' ?

What does this passage teach you about how you can encourage the rest of us to persevere with the gospel?
How are you going to do it?

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

AIM

- To understand the imperative of living a holy life and what this will mean for our relationships.

CONTEXT

- Paul desire for the Thessalonians is that they express an integrity and purity of a life appropriate to that which God has done in and for them in order that they will be found blameless when Christ returns (3:12-13).
- Such a future is God's gift to all those he has chosen (1:12), called and sanctified (2 Thess 2:13). Love for others is an essential aspect of this and the means by which holiness is maintained (3:12-13). All those who are sanctified will seek to live a life worthy of their calling (2:12).
- Between the 'wish prayers' in 3:11-13 and 5:23-24 Paul presents crucial teaching on what such 'practical' holiness will entail (eg 4:1-12). In so doing he is affirming instructions he had already given them (4:1) and in all likelihood also responding to news from Timothy's recent visit (3:6). A common feature of all these instructions is a concern for the good of others.

BE SANCTIFIED (4:3)

God's will for them is that they 'be sanctified' (4:3). The word in the original is '*hagiasmos*' and Paul uses it again in 4:4 and 4:7. But what does this mean?

1. *Progressive moral transformation.*

This has been perhaps the most common understanding in recent times. However Paul uses the same word in 4:4 and 4:7 - where the NIV translates it as 'holy' - and the idea of 'progressive moral transformation' doesn't fit the context there. It is unlikely that Paul would risk being misunderstood by using the same word in two different ways within a few verses. This argues somewhat against such an understanding.

2. *'Holiness' in the sense of 'a totally different quality and character of life'.*

This would continue the concern in the letter that the Thessalonians continue to live in a way consistent with the gospel.

When the Thessalonians perceived Paul's message to be God's word to them (2:13) they heard not only the saving message of the gospel but the ethical imperatives that flowed from it (4:1, 6b). The power of the message was seen in transformed lives (1:3, 5-6, 9-10). Therefore persevering with the gospel means more than just believing certain truths about Jesus - although it necessarily includes that (2:13). It also means continuing to live transformed lives.

The Thessalonians had started well (1:3, 3:6). Paul wants them to continue (4:1b, 10b) - and so does God (4:3). God's desire for His people is that they continue to manifest in daily life the practical outworking of His work for and in them (4:3). This will mean continuing with radically different lifestyles from those around them. They have been given His Spirit (4:8). They are different. God wants this to be seen in how they live.

GOD'S WILL FOR THEM IS ...

... TO BE DIFFERENT

Love for one another is the essential means by which holiness is maintained (3:12 ... 'so that' . 3:13). And holiness is expressed above all in love. Therefore as Paul encourages them to express their standing in Christ in different areas of their lives concern for the good of others is close to the heart of it all (cf 4:6, 9, 12).

... TO AVOID SEXUAL IMMORALITY

Extra marital sex was widely tolerated and sometimes even encouraged in the world of Paul's day. (So what's changed?) However the gospel demanded a new way of life in those who believe it.

The gist of what follows is clear, even if some of the details are not (see below). Christian expression of human sexuality will be at odds with the non-Christian world and marked by restraint and 'other person centredness' rather than covetous self indulgence.

Questions raised include:

- *What exactly is meant by 'sexual immorality'?*

Some argue, from 4:6, that Paul has homosexual acts particularly in view. However this is unnecessarily restrictive as:

- porneo* (translated 'sexual immorality' in 4:3) has a wider reference to all forms of extra marital sex, not just homosexual sex.
- 'Brother' (4:6) most likely includes 'brothers and sisters', referring to all those who are abused and hurt by extramarital sex. However even if 'brother' here doesn't have this wider reference the meaning is little effected as husbands fathers and brothers are wronged when their wives, daughters and sisters are abused.

- *Is extra marital sex the only abuse of human sexuality in view here?*

The precise translation of v4 is uncertain. Literally v4 reads 'that each of you know how to acquire (or posses) his own vessel'. But what 'vessel' is being referred to - the individual's body or their spouse? (See NIV footnote)

Their spouse: The word translated 'vessel' (*skeus*) never refers anywhere else to 'the body'. However acquire (which fits awkwardly with 'body') is used elsewhere in the context of getting a wife

Own body But such a reading ('acquire a spouse') is thought by many to give too low view of marriage, so it must (they argue) be the individual's own body that is in view. Others see such an objection as simply revealing a lesser concern for holiness than Paul's.

If relationship with a spouse is in view here, Paul's target in these verses is not just the abuse of human sexuality outside the marriage relationship, but also its abuse within it highlighting the fact that it is possible for sex within marriage to be self centred and abusive (4:5-6a) in the same way that extramarital sex always is.

- *Why should Christians behave like this?* Paul gives a number of reasons:

+vely Purity and holiness of life is God's will for them (4:3, 7).
Christ wants them to live that way (4:2).
The gospel calls them to such a lifestyle (4:7).
Holiness is to be expressed in love for one another (4:6).

-vely Rejection of these instruction - and adopting a more permissive policy - amounts to a rejection of God and His indwelling Spirit and incurs God's wrath (4:6).

A key part of Paul's argument is that the way Christians express their sexuality must reflect a concern for the well being of others, and it is this concern that should motivate the Christian to be different from those around.

... TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER (9-10)

Acknowledging that it is God who has enabled them to generously express their love for one another (4:9) he urges them to do so more and more (4:10) appealing to God's continuing presence in the believer (4:8). God has been at work by His Spirit moulding them (through the teaching they have received) to conform to his will. His Spirit both demands and makes possible the reflection of His holiness in the lives of His people, hence the requirement to abound in love more and more (4:10).

... NOT ABUSE OTHERS

These verses are sometimes understood as requiring Christians to 'keep your head down, keep your nose clean and work hard. If you do that you will win the respect of others and so further the cause of the gospel'. But is this what Paul was saying?

- It is clear from Paul's letters that some of the church were not earning their own living. Perhaps encouraged by erroneous expectations of Christ's imminent return (1 Thess 4:13ff, 2 Thess 2:1ff) they had become idle (5:14) and were thus a burden on others (2 Thess 3:6,11-12). Those involved are said not to have responded to Paul's teaching on the subject (2 Thess 3:6).
- Paul had worked hard when he was with them in order not to be a burden to them (2:9) and, in part at least, to be an example for them (2 Thess 3:8-10): each one of them was to take responsibility for paying their own way so as not to burden others.

This is the context of 4:11-12. Paul is concerned that the Christians work and pay their way so as not to become a burden to others. The motivation once more is 'other person centred'. The emphasis is on *that* you work (to feed yourself and so as not to abuse others) rather than *how* you work (to win the respect of others and thus an open ear for the gospel): 'make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands ... so that you will behave properly towards outsiders and not be in need' (NASB).

THINKING IT THROUGH ...

Summarise the relationship between holiness and love explored in these verses.

How can we encourage each another to live as Paul (and Christ) commands?

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:28

AIM

- To understand how a clear understanding of God's purposes for His people will give us confidence in the face of death and motivate us to work for healthy congregational relationships.

CONTEXT

- Between the prayers of 3:11-13 and 5:23-24 Paul instructs the Thessalonians in 'practical holiness'. What he has to say is not new (4:1a, 2) for when they had received the saving message of the gospel from Paul (2:13) they had also received ethical guidelines (4:1) which also came with God's authority (4:1-2, 8) and which they had embraced. He nevertheless urges them to do so 'more and more' (4:1b, 10).
- His motivation in all this is the return of Christ. This has been in view throughout the letter (cf 1:10, 2:19-20, 3:13, 4:6b). God's will for them is that they and live a holy life now (4:3, 7) so that they will be found standing firm in the Lord when He returns (3:13) and Paul's seeks to encourage them to this end by exhorting them to holy living (4:3ff).
- It is clear then that they knew how they should be behaving as they waited Christ's return. However they were less clear about what would happen / did happen to those who died whilst waiting, or of the difference between those who had died and those who were still alive at the time. It is to this area of confusion that Paul now turns (4:13ff).
- Another main concern of Paul's is Christian encouragement. In his frustration at having been prevented from visiting them Paul has sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them (3:2). He has been encouraged by the news of them (3:7) and has written to them in turn to encourage them. As he goes on to teach them about living in the light of Jesus' return he wants them in turn to encourage one another by reminding one another of the truths of the gospel (4:18) and setting one another an example in holy living (5:11).

STRUCTURE

4:13-18	Don't grieve like others
5:1-5	Don't be caught napping like others
5:6-8	For you belong to 'the day'.
5:9-28	So encourage one another.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE? (4:13-18)

- The question as to what will happen to those who die before Christ's return has become an issue at Thessalonica. (Possibly as a result of the martyrdom.)

Paul wants them not to be discouraged (4:18); or ignorant (4:13); or to grieve as others do with the despair of those without the hope in the gospel (4:13). He wants them to continue to live in the light of Christ's certain return (5:4ff), when all believers - both those who have died and those are still alive - will be transformed to be with Him forever (4:17).

Once again teaching with the authority of Christ (4:15) he reminds them that:

- i. Christ has died, has been raised, and has ascended into heaven; and that He will return (4:16a).
- ii. When he returns He will bring with him those Christians who have died (4:14). Then at 'the trumpet call of God' (4:16b) those believers who have died ('the dead in Christ') will be raised (4:16c).
- iii. Only then will those believers who are still alive at the time be caught up together with them so that both groups will be with Christ forever (4:17).

- *But how can those believers who have died both return with Christ (14b) and yet be raised when he returns (4:16)?*

These verses (together and a few other - eg Luke 23:43, Rev 6:9ff) argue for the continued conscious existence of a believer after death distinct from that which will obtain in the new creation - an intermediate state between that which we have now in a 'perishable' body and the 'imperishable' one that we will have then.

The physically dead believer therefore waits with Christ in heaven for His return. When this happens they will be united with a newly raised and transformed 'resurrection' body fitted for the new creation. Those still alive at this time will not experience this intermediate state for they will be changed 'in a flash, a the twinkling of an eye' (1 Cor 15:51) and join Christ and the rest of his people (4:17).

This perspective should encourage believers who are living in the light of the age to come and mean that their grief for one another is fundamentally different from others (4:13, 18).

WHEN WILL ALL THIS TAKE PLACE? (5:1-10)

Paul has no need to write to them about times and dates when this will all happen, not because he or they know already but because:

1. No-one knows (5:1).

To that extent Christ's return will be a surprise - unexpected and unannounced (5:2). It is certain to happen (4:15, 5:3), but it will occur when all seems well and people least expect it (5:3).

2. It shouldn't make any difference anyway (5:4ff).

The Christian has no need to know when all this will occur because the *when* is unimportant. They already know that it will happen. Indeed in one sense it has already happened (cf Col 3:1, Eph 2:6): they already 'belong' to it (5:5, 8) and should therefore be living as though it had arrived (5:6, 8).

BELONGING TO THE DAY (5:11-22)

The timing of Christ's return and whether or not the believer is alive at the time is irrelevant, since whatever state they are in at the second coming God has determined that they will be with Christ forever (5:9-11).

All 'belong' to that day *now*. Speculation about times and dates is therefore immaterial. Living in a way that reflect that fact is not (5:8, 11-22). Those who have received salvation (5:9) and belong to Christ are called to a totally different quality and character of life that shows in daily life His work in them and for them (4:3, 5:23).

The Thessalonians were living like that - loving one another; continuing to trust God and persevere in the gospel in the light of Christ's return (1:2) and encouraging one another to that end (5:11). Paul wants them to do so more and more and so. So he prays for them and encourages them to continue.

PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH (5:23)

The focus here is not on

- any 'tripartite' view of human nature. [The terms 'spirit', 'soul' and 'body' are simply piled up as a rhetorical device to stress the hope (and the confidence - 5:24) that God will keep every part of them blameless to the end.]
- or an individual's spiritual development
- or any 'second' work of grace resulting in 'entire sanctification' or 'sinless perfection'.

None of these fit the context. Paul concern is rather for the complete expression in their lives *together* of what it means to be the holy people of God. This has been his concern since 4:1, and echoes his prayer in 3:11-13. His instruction in 5:12-19 are also directed to this end.

PAUL'S DIRECTIONS TO THE CHURCH (5:12-22)

Whilst addressed to the individual and having a wider remit than the congregation (5:15) Paul's primary concern in 5:12-19 is their corporate well being. All impinge on their relationships and continued well being. If they follow them they will be expressing love for one another (in real, practical and perhaps, for us, some surprising ways) and therefore encouraging one another to keep preserving with the gospel as they await Christ's return - as in 3:11-13.

THINKING IT THROUGH ...

Summarise the letter in less than 20 words. How has studying it challenged your understanding of what it means to be a Christian?

2 THESSALONIANS 1

AIM

- To understand why the Thessalonians needed Paul's reassurance and how Paul's teaching on the second coming of Christ addresses their need.

CONTEXT

- Many of the themes of 1 Thessalonians occur in this second letter which is therefore usually thought to have been written fairly shortly afterwards.
- The Thessalonians continue to face attack from outside the church (1:4) but now they are also threatened by new teaching from within (2:2). Add to that the 'slings and arrows' of day to day existence ('trials' - 1:4) and Thessalonians confidence in the gospel that Paul had brought them was being sorely tested.
- In response to all this Paul (who himself continues to face opposition (3:2)) sends a second letter, almost every part of which is concerned with reassuring them about the gospel and their security in it. He continues to be encouraged by their perseverance (1:3-4) and to pray for them (1:11-12, 2:16-17, 3:16), encouraging them to keep going with the gospel (2:15); reassuring them about the genuineness of the work God is doing in them and that He who has begun a good work in them will bring it to completion (2:13-14, 3:3-4).
- The main issue that seems to have been shaking their confidence in the gospel was false teaching about Jesus' return. He has addressed some of the issue before (2:15, cf 1 Thess 4:1, 13ff) but is concerned that they are still being unsettled by erroneous teaching, purportedly coming from him (2:2), that contradicted what he had said previously (2:5). His basic response is 'Don't be unsettled (2:2) ... don't be deceived (2:3) ... stick with what I told you (2:15)'. In doing so he helps them (and us) better understand their times (and our) times.

STRUCTURE

Paul follows his usual pattern of opening the letter with thanksgiving (1:3-10) and prayer (11-12) but adapting it to reassure the Thessalonians of their security in the gospel.

A good church going through a rough time 1:3-4
A good God waiting for the right time 1:5-10
A good man praying in the meantime 1:11-12

PERSEVERING DESPITE TRIALS

(1:3-4)

- When Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians he rejoiced in the fact that they had persevered with the gospel despite opposition (1:2ff, 2:13ff) and urged them to continue to do so. They could help one another to do this by continuing to love and serve one another, and to do so more and more (3:11-4:1, 10).

By the time of 2 Thess that they had done just that. Each individual had grown in maturity by exercising love for one another (1:3). This maturity is once again seen in growth of love (1:3), faith and perseverance - or hope (1:4) in the face of both active opposition ('persecutions') and the ordeals of every day existence ('trials').

REASSURANCE IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING

Opposition, trials, suffering: then (as now) were causing some to doubt Paul's gospel: God must be unjust, or impotent or both. Or perhaps he was just not bothered about the Thessalonians. Paul argues that God is just, and powerful and supremely concerned for the Thessalonians. More than that, He was active in fulfilling His purposes in them and bringing them to glory.

GOD IS AT WORK (1:5)

The fact that they are being strengthened and are persevering in this midst of such trials and persecutions (1:3) bears witness to God's righteous judgment, and that they will be found worthy, blameless and holy in His presence (1:5, cf 1 Thess 3:13).

Paul's giving thanks for them (1:3) and 'boasting' in them as an example to others (1:4, cf 1 Thess 1:7-8) is not to puff them up but to draw attention to the fact that it is God who is at work in and amongst them to bring them to heaven. Their present circumstances rather than causing them to doubt the gospel should rather increase their confidence in it.

(The idea in 1:5 is *not* that their sufferings (1:3) will somehow make them worthy of the kingdom of God but rather that the fact that they are persevering in the face of suffering is evidence of the fact that God has declared them worthy of it.)

GOD IS JUST

The suffering of the people of God can only be made sense of when seen in the light of eternity (1:6-9). What might seem unjust in the here and now is given a new perspective when viewed in the light of Jesus' return when those who persecute Christ's people will themselves receive the treatment they gave others. God will vindicate His people.

Life is unfair. However justice will be done, and will seem to have been done, when Christ returns in judgment. At that time those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel will be punished 'with everlasting destruction' and 'shut out of the presence of the Lord' (contra 1 Thess 4:7). The reassurance for the Thessalonians is that because they believed Paul's testimony about Christ (1:10) they will join with Christ and His holy people.

These verses teach what on many levels is difficult to hear. However the following is clear:

- the punishment is real
- it is retributive (what is received is that which is deserved (cf Luke 12:47-48)).
- it vindicates believers.

'If there is any truth in Scripture at all, this is true - that those who stubbornly refuse to submit to the gospel, and to obey Jesus Christ, incur at the Last Advent an infinite and irreparable loss. They pass into a night on which no morning dawns.' (Denny) God's people are with Christ. Those who reject Him are not (1:9).

Whether or not 'everlasting destruction' (1:9) refers to 'eternal conscious punishment' or to 'conditional immortality' (the annihilationist position that dismisses any idea of eternal conscious perdition as inconsistent with God's love) needs to be decided on issues other than the precise meaning of the Greek for 'destroyed', which can have a range of meaning from 'lost' (as in the lost coin or son in Luke 15), 'ruined' (referring to the wineskin Matt 9:17) as well as 'kill' (Matt 2:13), perish (Luke 15:17, 1 Cor 10:9), etc. etc. (For a discussion of the issues involved see D. A. Carson in 'The Gagging of God' p 515-536.)

PRAYING IN THE LIGHT OF ETERNITY

Once again Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians is framed within the context of God's purposes for them (cf 1 Thess 3:11-13, 5:23-24) he has just outlined (1:11, cf 1:3-10). In the face of persecution and affliction they needed to be comforted and strengthened in all that they did.

Paul's prayer is that their faith in the gospel and the perspective that this gives them on life (1:5-10) should motivate them in all that they do, and that God will be working in them that Christ may be glorified.

THINKING IT THROUGH ...

What issues make us doubt the gospel / doubt our membership of God's people?

How are these things addressed by the perspective Paul gives here?

2 Thessalonians 2

AIM

To understand that attacks of the gospel are inevitable from within the 'church' or without the church

To understand that God's people are ultimately immune from all such attacks.

STRUCTURE

2:1-12 The work of Satan in the church

2:13-17 The work of God for the church

ALARM AT THESSALONICA

Some teaching abroad in Thessalonica concerning Christ's return was causing alarm in the church (2:1-2). The details are necessarily obscure since in responding to their misunderstanding Paul alludes to things he has taught them before of which we are ignorant (2:5). Also his response is couched in what are for us unfamiliar terms (eg 2:3, 9). Add to this the fact that these verses deal with the future - the precise details of which must necessarily remain hidden (1 Thess 5:1) -and the result has been considered 'probably the most obscure and difficult in the whole of the Pauline correspondence' (Leon Morris). However despite these difficulties the thrust passage remains clear:

- i. There is teaching abroad in the church that the 'day of the Lord' has already come, and this is unsettling many (2:2).
- ii. Paul insists that the 'day of the Lord' has yet to come (2:3ff). There present trial and persecutions alone bore loud witness to this (1:3-10), but Paul has more to say on the matter (2:1-12).
- ii. Although it remains in the future there are elements of it that are relevant to them now - not least being those that are at work in the church now - and he wants then to understand how this effects them (2:7, 9ff)

THE CLAIM : 'THE DAY OF THE LORD HAS COME!'

'The Day of the Lord' refers to that day when God would intervene to establish His kingdom (cf Amos 5:18-20, 1s 2:12ff). Here it is identified with Christ's return when He will judge His enemies and the gathering of His people (1:10, cf 1 Thess 16-17).

It is clear that reports were circulating that 'the day of the Lord' had already come and that they claimed divine (and apostolic) authority (2:2).

THE EFFECT OF THE CLAIM

Such claims were naturally alarming and unsettling those who continued to suffer trials and persecutions.

If true, the Thessalonians clearly weren't included amongst God's people since the victory over God's enemies was not part of their experience. If false, how could they have confidence in any apostolic or 'prophetic words. Believers set convictions were being challenged by these false reports and many were becoming rattled.

PAUL'S REPLY:

- NO, IT HASN'T
This at least is clear in Paul's response to the claim - it is wrong (2:3). Those who make it are being deceived. It cannot have already happened, since when the 'man of lawlessness' (whoever he is - see below) is revealed (2:3, 6, 8) he will be seen by everyone (note the parallel between 1:7 and 2:3, 6 & 8): the event will be 'unmissable'.

• **BUT IT IS ANTICIPATED IN THE PRESENT**

However the very deception of those who make such claims is itself a mark of this 'man'. He may not have come yet but he is already at work, even in the churches (2:7) - especially in the churches (2:9) - doing Satan's work of lying and deceiving (2:9-10). He does this by promulgating false teaching (2:2) with accompanying 'miracles, sign and wonders'.

(Counterfeit (2:9) means not that the 'signs and wonders' weren't real signs and wonders, but that that which they sought to affirm as true was false. The 'miraculous' can happen - and Satan can be behind it.)

THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS (2:3, 4, 8-10)

WHO IS HE AND WHEN WILL HE COME?

After the time of the 'rebellion' (2:3 - or better, 'apostasy'). But what is Paul referring to? Options include

- i. the close of the NT period which was accompanied by a time of widespread persecution and apostasy and idols erected in the Jerusalem temple. But it is difficult to square all the details of these verses with the events of AD 70.
- ii. the coming of the 'antichrist' immediately prior to Christ's return. Although Paul doesn't use the term here he is represented as a caricature of Christ: as Christ is the emissary, agent and representative of God the 'man of lawlessness' is the emissary, agent and representative of Satan. (Note the parallelism. Christ is coming - 2:1,8. the man of lawlessness is coming - 2:9. Christ will be revealed - 1:7. the man of lawlessness will be revealed - 2:3, 6, 8.)

'Both (Christ and this figure) have a revelation (1:7, 2:3, 6, 8); both have an influence in the world before the revelation takes place (2:7)... as Christ does mighty works and signs and wonders for the salvation of mankind so does he for their deception and ruin (2:9-10). Christ came to seek and to save those who are lost; his rival comes to complete the perdition of those who are perishing (2:10).' (Plummer).

Therefore there cannot be the end of history until this counterfeit coming has occurred and 'the man of lawlessness' has been destroyed by breath of Christ's coming (2:8).

- iii. anticipations in history of this final event. On this understanding there have been a number of fulfilments throughout history that are likely to continue until Christ returns. Hence the early reformers identified him in the Pope; the later reformers in the institution of the papacy. Others have identified him as Hitler (arising as he did after 100 years of apostasy in the German church), etc, etc (see BST commentary for further examples).

BUT IT REALLY DOESN'T MATTER

Because the relevance of all this to the Thessalonians (and to us) is not in the 'who or when', but in the fact that he is active now in opposing God and calling on people to worship him (2:4, 7, 9. cf 1 John 2:18, 4:3b). He deceives those who refuse to love the truth (2:10) and makes them believe a lie. He is active in the church now (2:3, 7, 10) but need not be feared because he is doomed to destruction (2:8). For God affirms the rejection of the gospel by those who refuse to believe the truth and delight in wickedness by causing them to believe the lie (2:11-12)..

SO BE ENCOURAGED (13-14)

Paul writes all this not to scare them or to cause unnecessary speculation but simply to reassure them and help them understand the times they are living. He wants them to understand the true origin of all 'prophecy, report or letter' (2:2) that sought to undermine the gospel (namely Satan) and understand that their present experience was in line with that which the gospel should cause them to expect.

All of the Trinity (2:13) was at work in choosing them (13c), setting them apart (13c) and causing them to believe the truth rather than be deceived by a lie (2:11). All this had been achieved through the message that Paul had brought them (2:14). They had been saved from the coming wrath to share in Christ's glory (2:14). That which God had started He would complete, so.

STAND FIRM! (15)

How will they be able to do that? By holding to the apostolic word to them. The Spirit set them apart for God by causing them to believe the word of truth of the gospel (2:14). By holding on to that truth (2:14) they will be kept safe from all attempts of Satan to deceive them (2:9-10) and make them believe a lie.

Paul's prayer for them is that God who has loved them by giving them eternal hope in the gospel will encourage them and strengthen them now so that they keep going with the gospel as they wait to share in his eternal glory (2:16-17, 14c).

THINKING IT THROUGH ...

How does this help us understand the times in which we live?

How in practice can we help one another to 'stand firm and hold on to the teachings' we have received?

2 Thessalonians 3

AIM

To understand the place of work within the context God's work on behalf of His people.

CONTEXT

Paul has sought in 2 Thessalonians to reassure the church about their standing in the gospel.

- Their experiences - false teaching from within the church (2:7ff) and persecutions and trials from without (1:4) - must be seen in the right perspective. Only by seeing them from within a framework provided by the gospel (1:5-10, 2:1-12) will they understand what is going on and be reassured, for such opposition is the inevitable consequences of a church living for Christ in a world that has rejected him. Both are doomed to destruction when Christ returns (1:6-10, 2:8).
- The God who has chosen and called them through the gospel is completely committed to getting them to heaven to be with Christ forever (1:10, 2:13-14) and He will do it.

Paul continues to reassure them (3:1-5) whilst addressing the issue of Christian work (or more specifically Christian idleness). This was clearly an issue at Thessalonica (cf 1 Thess 4:11-12, 5:14) and had yet to be sorted out. Paul makes no direct link between confusion about the place of work in the Christian life and misunderstandings or misapplications of Christ's second coming. He does however address it from within the same gospel perspective that he used in dealing with issues about persecution and Christ's return (3:1-5, cf 1:11, 2:1ff).

STRUCTURE

- | | |
|---------|--------------------------------|
| 3:1-5 | The faithfulness of God. |
| 3:6-13 | Idleness, work and the gospel. |
| 3:14-18 | Discipline and unity. |

THE LORD IS FAITHFUL (3:1-5)

Paul is confident that the Thessalonians will continue with the gospel. However as always with Paul this confidence is in God rather than in them.

He knows that God is just (1:6) and faithful (3:3). He has kept them going up until then despite everything (1:3-4) and He will continue to strengthen and protect them from Satan attacks wherever they come from (3:3). The devil may prowl around like a roaring lion but it is all bluff. He is toothless and powerless in the face of God who is utterly committed to His people. Christ persevered despite suffering and God will enable them to do so too (3:5) as He will continue to provide for them in the future as He has done in the past, enabling them to do all that the gospel asks of them (3:4, cf 1:11).

As always Paul's prayers are controlled by his trust in God and His Purposes (3:5, cf 2:11-12, 16-17). He works and prays for the spread of the message of the gospel, the honouring of God and the glory of Christ (3:1) and prays for himself as he has prayed for the Thessalonians, that he be delivered from those who oppose the gospel.

IDLENESS, WORK AND THE GOSPEL (3:6-13)

Why this was an issue in Thessalonica is not clear. That it was an issue is clear (cf 1 Thess 4:1, 11-12, 5:14). Once again in addressing the issues Paul places them within a gospel framework (3:4).

THE COMMANDS

That the issue is a serious one can be seen from the language he uses. He 'commands'

- i. the congregation in the 'name of the Lord Jesus Christ' not to associate with those amongst them who refuse to work (3:6, 14.) They are not to support them (3:12). Rather they are to discipline them (3:14 probably carries with it the idea that they are to be excluded from communion).
- ii. the idle are commanded in a similar way to sort themselves out and to start working to support themselves (3:12).

HIS EXAMPLE

They should follow the example he set whilst he was with them (3:7). Part of his reason for paying his own way in Thessalonica was to model to them that they should work, even though as a preacher of the gospel he had the right not to do so (3:8-9).

THE RATIONALE

Paul gives three reasons:

- i. So they stop being busybodies : ill disciplined and interfering in other peoples business (3:11)
- ii. So that they are not a burden to others (3:8)
- iii. So that they have something to eat ((3:10, 12)

Hence work is right and proper and Christians are commanded to do it. They are not to be 'spongers' or abuse the love that others have for them but are to fulfil their responsibilities to provide for themselves and not be a burden to the congregation. . Everyone in a church getting on quietly, earning their own keep, and paying their own way will win the respect of non-believers. Not doing so would earn their disdain (cf 1 Thess 4:11-12).

Thus the reasons Paul gives for working has nothing to do with status, significance, achievement, self worth, identity, earning power or being strategic. *What* work you do is an irrelevance. *That* you work - and *how* you work - is not.

DISCIPLINE AND UNITY (3:14-16)

Don't be deceived (2:3); stand firm; hold onto the teachings we passed on to you (2:15); work to support yourself and don't associate with idle spongers (3:6,12) summarise most of the instructions of the letter (3:14). This teaching comes with Christ's authority (cf 1 Thess 4:1-2); so to reject it is to reject Christ (1 Thess 4:8).

Paul's concern for the for the unity of the congregation (3:16, 18) doesn't cause him to compromise on it's holiness (3:14). If members of the congregation persistently refuse to obey his instructions they are to be disciplined. They are to be denied some of the benefits of congregational life with the purposes of shaming them and bringing them to repentance (3:14. cf 1 Cor 5). Yet even at such a time they are to be treated as brothers rather than enemies (3:15).

THINKING IT THROUGH ...

How did Paul's attitude to work challenge Thessalonians view of work? How does it challenge our own?

What have you learnt about God and His gospel from 1 & 2 Thessalonians this term? How has this 'rebuked, corrected, trained and equipped' you as a Christian?