

The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
THREE

PAUL AND THE
THESSALONIANS



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson Three

Paul and the Thessalonians

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I heard about a father who attended his son's university graduation. After the ceremony, he proudly approached his son and asked, "So, what are you going to do with the rest of your life, son?" The graduate smiled broadly and said, "Well, Dad, I've given my future a lot of thought, and I think I'm just going to head straight for retirement." Now, most of us can sympathize with that young graduate. But nearly everyone realizes that to be responsible, we have to work hard for many years before we retire.

Now, as strange as it may sound, that young man's attitude came very close to the attitudes of some Christians living in the first century. They became so zealous for Christ's glorious second coming that they abandoned the responsibilities of living for Christ in this life.

This third study of *The Heart of Paul's Theology* is entitled "Paul and the Thessalonians." And in this lesson, we're going to see how some Christians in the church in Thessalonica had caused serious problems because they believed that Christ's return was extremely close at hand. And we're also going to look at how Paul responded to this misguided belief.

Our study of Paul and the Thessalonians will divide into three parts. First, we'll investigate the background to Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Second, we'll examine the structure and content of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. And third, we will see how Paul's letters revealed one of his central theological outlooks, his doctrine of the last days or his eschatology. Let's look first at the background to Paul's letters to the Thessalonians.

BACKGROUND

As we have emphasized throughout this series, the Apostle Paul wrote his letters in order to address particular issues that arose in different churches. So, as we look at 1 and 2 Thessalonians, we need to ask some basic questions: What was going on in the Thessalonian church? Why did Paul write to them?

We'll answer these questions first by exploring Paul's second missionary journey, and then by delving into some particular problems that developed in the church of Thessalonica. Let's look first at Paul's second missionary journey.

SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Paul's second missionary journey is recorded in Acts 15:36 through Acts 18:22. There Luke states that Paul traveled mainly in the regions of Asia Minor before continuing on to several regions of modern-day Greece. Like Paul's first missionary journey, this trip also began in Syrian Antioch, probably around the year A.D. 48 or 49. Paul and Barnabas planned to minister together, but they came into conflict because Barnabas wanted John Mark to accompany them. Paul objected because Mark had abandoned them during their first missionary journey. Consequently, Paul chose Silas as his traveling companion, while Barnabas and Mark made their way to Cyprus.

Paul and Silas first went through Syria and then into Cilicia. Although we don't know the particular towns they visited, the book of Acts does tell us that they strengthened a number of churches in these regions. From Cilicia, they traveled into Galatia where they visited the churches Paul had planted during his first missionary journey. They stopped first in Derbe, and then in Lystra, where Timothy joined them. From Lystra the party continued through Galatia and into Phrygia.

Now, at this point, Paul wanted to preach in the province of Asia, the westernmost portion of Asia Minor, and in Bythinia to the north. But the Holy Spirit did not permit him. So, the company went from Phrygia to the coastal port of Troas about 300 miles away, where the reason for their hasty move to the west became clear. In a dream, Paul saw a man who begged him to come to Macedonia, primarily to areas that now lie within the northern regions of Greece.

In response to this dream, Paul and his companions immediately sailed for Macedonia. They passed briefly through Neapolis before arriving in Philippi, where they remained for some time and saw a good number of people come to Christ. Eventually, however, the people of Philippi incarcerated Paul for exorcising a demon from a slave girl. But even in jail the gospel spread. In the middle of the night an earthquake shook loose the prisoners' chains and opened the prison doors. Although the prisoners could have escaped, they remained in their cells so that the jailor would not be punished for losing them. The jailor was so impressed by this act of charity toward him that he and his entire household came to faith.

From Philippi, the missionaries moved through Amphipolis and Apollonia before arriving in Thessalonica, where Paul preached the gospel in the synagogue for three weeks. Through this evangelism, a number of Jews and many Gentiles received the gospel. Paul worked to support himself during this time, and also received gifts from the Philippian Christians that helped meet his needs. These facts suggest that Paul may have remained in Thessalonica as long as a few months. Eventually, however, some unbelieving Jews became jealous of the gospel's success and formed a mob against Paul and Silas, forcing them to flee to Berea.

At first, the Bereans received Paul's gospel message eagerly. But soon, unbelieving Thessalonian Jews found out about it and aroused that city against him too. Paul fled once more, this time making his way to Athens, where he preached not only to the Jews in the synagogue, as was his custom, but also to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill.

From Athens, Paul traveled to Corinth, where he spent at least a year and a half, perhaps more, planting and raising a church. After this, he headed east, stopping briefly

in Cenchrea, then sailing to Ephesus in Asia Minor. From there he sailed to Caesarea and then made his way home to Antioch in Syria, perhaps stopping briefly in Jerusalem along the way. His journey ended probably in the year A.D. 51 or 52.

It was during this second missionary journey that Paul wrote his two letters to the Thessalonians. According to 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, while Paul was in Athens he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage the believers there. This would have been around the year A.D. 49 or 50, shortly after Paul and his company had left Thessalonica. When Timothy returned, probably in A.D. 50 or 51, Paul was most likely in Corinth. Apparently, Timothy had told Paul about a number of serious misunderstandings and practical problems that had arisen in the Thessalonian church. Paul most likely wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth shortly after Timothy's arrival in order to address these issues. 2 Thessalonians was probably written a few months later, also from Corinth.

Now that we have seen how Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians fit within the broader context of his second missionary journey, we should look more specifically at the problems that came upon the church of Thessalonica.

PROBLEMS IN THESSALONICA

What issues concerned Paul? What was so serious that he wrote to the Thessalonians not once but twice? As in any situation, there were many interwoven difficulties in Thessalonica. But as we read Paul's letters to this church, three main problems move to the foreground: first, the struggle of persecution; second, the rise of false prophets within the church; and third, some issues of practical Christian living that the false prophets brought to the church. First let's turn our attention to the problem of persecution.

Persecution

When Paul had first brought the gospel to Thessalonica, the believers there had become the object of violence, enduring serious, life-threatening persecution. Listen to Luke's description of events in Thessalonica recorded in Acts 17:5:

The Jews were jealous, so they rounded up some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They attacked Jason's house, seeking to bring Paul and Silas out to the crowd (Acts 17:5).

In fact, the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica were so aggressive that they were not satisfied simply to drive Paul and Silas out of their city. Instead, they followed the missionaries to Berea to trouble them even further. Luke recorded this fact in Acts 17:13:

When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds (Acts 17:13).

The Jewish opponents of the gospel were tenacious, and they even inspired Gentiles to oppose the Christian faith as they pursued Christians from town to town.

Paul's letters to the Thessalonians indicate that this suffering continued after his departure from Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, Paul described their trials in this way:

You suffered the same things at the hands of your own countrymen that those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, who displease God and are hostile to all men, keeping us from speaking to the Gentiles in order that they might be saved (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16).

From the time Paul first preached in Thessalonica until he wrote his epistles to them, persecution had been a prominent feature of living for Christ in Thessalonica. And as Paul wrote to the believers in that city, he was very concerned about this persecution and the effects it was having on them.

False Prophets

In addition to suffering persecution, the Thessalonian church had also come under the influence of false prophets. In some ways, this is not surprising. In the first place, throughout history, when Christians have suffered persecution for long periods of time, they have often longed for Jesus to return to deliver them from their trials. Simply put, suffering Christians tend to orient their entire lives toward the second coming of Christ. When this life offers little more than disappointment and suffering, we turn our eyes toward the day when Jesus will rescue us.

In the second place, when Christians are highly concerned with the return of Christ, they often become susceptible to false teachers or false prophets who have extreme views regarding the second coming. And this is precisely what happened to the Thessalonians. False teachers came into the church with misguided beliefs about the nearness of Christ's return.

To appreciate how much trouble the false teachers in Thessalonica stirred up, we will touch on two matters: the conflict that developed between the false prophets and Paul, and the content of the false prophets' teaching. Let's look first at the challenge of false prophecy.

It is apparent in many sections of 1 and 2 Thessalonians that false teachers strongly opposed Paul's teaching. For example, when he received Timothy's reports on the condition of the Thessalonian church, Paul learned that false prophets had entered the fellowship of believers and had spoken against some of his teachings. One of Paul's responses to this problem was to remind the Thessalonians to examine every prophecy they heard. Listen to his words in 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21:

Do not despise prophecies. Test everything; hold on to the good (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).

Paul instructed the Thessalonians to “test everything” and to “hold on to the good” because he wanted them to evaluate the content of every instruction they received. They were to retain only the good, disregarding everything that did not comport with what they knew to be true from the Scriptures and from Paul’s teaching.

But the false prophets did not give up easily. Instead, they continued to teach and preach their false doctrines. In fact, they may have gone so far as to forge letters under Paul’s name in an attempt to persuade the Thessalonians of their views. Paul was clearly worried about this type of activity when he wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2:

We ask you brothers, that you not be easily unsettled or alarmed by a spirit, report or letter supposed to have come from us (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

Paul’s concern with the problem of forgeries is also apparent in 2 Thessalonians 3:17, where he wrote:

The greeting of Paul by my own hand. This is a sign in all my letters; this is how I write (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

Paul added words written by his own hand as a signature that distinguished his letters from forgeries, helping the Thessalonians to identify letters that were genuinely his and to reject false prophecy.

This conflict with the false prophets raises another issue for us as we read Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians. What were these false prophets teaching? We cannot be sure of everything they taught, but when we recall the ongoing persecution in Thessalonica and examine the content of Paul’s Thessalonian epistles, we may surmise that the false prophets had a variety of misconceptions about the second coming of Christ. Their central problem, however, was that they believed that Jesus would return almost immediately. In fact, as incredible as it may seem to us, some false prophets had even proclaimed that Christ had already returned. Listen to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3:

With respect to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask, brothers, that you not be easily unsettled or alarmed by a spirit, report or letter ... saying that the day of the Lord is already here. Do not let anyone deceive you (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3).

Evidently, at least some of the false prophets had taught that the church of Thessalonica had already missed Christ’s return. It is possible that they drew these ideas from the civic cult of Thessalonica that worshiped Cabirus, a murdered local hero who was said to return to the world periodically. The false teachers may have applied this kind of outlook to the Christian faith by telling the Thessalonians that Christ had already returned.

Whatever the source of these errors, Paul strongly condemned the false prophets, instructing the Thessalonians to hold fast to what he had told them about the return of Christ.

Christian Living

Now that we have seen how persecution and false prophecy had come to the Thessalonians, we should look at some practical ways these problems impacted the church. A number of significant concerns appear in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, but we will focus on two: discouragement and irresponsibility. Let's look first at the Thessalonians' discouragement.

Usually, when Christians have believed that Jesus' return was just around the corner, they have inevitably been discouraged because Jesus has not appeared. In Thessalonica, many believers had oriented their entire lives around the immediate return of Christ. They had suffered and given up much for the sake of Christ. Yet, as the months went by, not only were they disappointed, but to make matters worse, a number of believers passed away. Those who remained alive worried about the eternal fate of the departed believers. This confusion led to doubts, and doubts to discouragement. Listen to the way Paul gently corrected them in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14:

We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, about those who are sleeping, lest you grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14).

Paul assured the Thessalonians that although the departed saints had died physically, they were still alive with Christ, and they would accompany Christ when he returned.

In addition to discouragement and confusion, the message of the false prophets had led to irresponsible living. It really isn't hard to understand what happened at Thessalonica. Put yourself in their situation. If you believed that the world would end next month, would you still go to work, or repair your house, or build schools? If you were highly confident that Jesus would return in just a matter of days, normal activities would no longer seem very important.

This is precisely what happened in Thessalonica. The false prophets convinced some of the Christians there that they no longer needed to support themselves. Their attitude was "Why bother with work when Jesus is coming back so soon?" This is why in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 Paul wrote that they should return to work:

Endeavor to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you behave properly toward outsiders and so that you lack nothing (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

Unfortunately, even after Paul had encouraged attention to daily affairs, some believers in Thessalonica still did not return to their responsibilities. So, Paul addressed this subject again in 2 Thessalonians, but this time more strongly. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 he wrote:

We command you, brothers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from every brother who behaves lazily rather than according to the teaching you received from us... For even when we were with you, we commanded this of you: “If someone does not want to work, he is not permitted to eat.” We hear that some among you are behaving lazily. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to live quietly, earning the bread they eat (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

False prophecies about the imminent return of Christ had encouraged the Thessalonians to become lazy and idle. And idleness had led to other problems.

So, we see that in Thessalonica the problems were manifold but interrelated. Persecution had opened the door for misconceptions about the immediate return of Christ. And those false beliefs led to practical problems such as discouragement and irresponsibility. Paul hoped that his letters to the Thessalonian church would help them deal with these difficult problems.

Now that we have seen some of the important issues that form the background to Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians, we are ready to look at the content of these letters.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

What did Paul write to the Thessalonians? How did he respond to their complex problems? We will briefly explore each letter to the Thessalonians by summarizing the contents of their major sections. Let's begin with 1 Thessalonians.

1 THESSALONIANS

First Thessalonians divides into five main sections: first, a salutation in 1:1; second, a report of thanksgiving in 1:2–2:16; third, a discussion of Paul's absence in 2:17–3:13; fourth, Paul's instructions for the church in 4:1–5:22; and fifth, some closing remarks in 5:23-28.

Salutation/Closing Remarks

As in many of Paul's letters, the first and last sections of 1 Thessalonians are fairly brief and straightforward. The salutation simply states that the letter is addressed to the Thessalonians and that it comes from Paul. Interestingly, it also mentions Silas and Timothy as co-authors. Of course, Silas and Timothy did not share Paul's apostolic authority, so it is on the basis of Paul's authority alone that this letter is included in the Bible. Nevertheless, the mention of Silas and Timothy points to the fact that Paul wrote this infallible letter from a truly human perspective. The closing section is also rather

simple, including a benediction, a request for prayer, and a final greeting. But when we move to the second section of 1 Thessalonians we come to a more complex portion of the book. This entire section reports Paul's gratitude to God and divides into three main parts.

Thanksgiving

First, in 1:2-10, Paul explained that he thanked God for the Thessalonians' endurance through suffering. As we have seen, unbelieving Jews and Gentiles persecuted the believers in Thessalonica. But the believers did not waver in their commitment to Christ. Instead, their hope in him grew strong. Listen to Paul's praise for them in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7:

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the message with joy from the Holy Spirit, despite your severe suffering, so that you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

The Thessalonians responded to persecution joyfully, and their faithfulness was exemplary.

In 2:1-12, Paul continued by expressing gratitude for the Thessalonians' firsthand knowledge of him. This was important because false prophets had subsequently challenged Paul's motives. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9-10 he wrote these words:

For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil; working night and day in order not to be a burden to any of you, we preached the gospel of God to you. You and God are witnesses of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed (1 Thessalonians 2:9-10).

The false prophets had tried to discredit Paul by claiming that he had taken advantage of the Thessalonians and that he had misled them and abused his authority over them. Apparently, at least some of the believers had begun to believe these false rumors. For this reason, Paul told them how happy he was that they had seen him with their own eyes. And of course, he did so in order to remind the Thessalonians that they knew him well enough to reject the false accusations.

In much the same way, in the third section of thanksgiving found in 2:13-16, Paul gave thanks that the Thessalonians had recognized his authority. Listen to the way he put it in 1 Thessalonians 2:13:

We also thank God constantly because when you received the word of God, which you received from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it truly is, God's word, which is working in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

The Thessalonians had received Paul's teaching as the very Word of God, giving him confidence that that they would remain faithful to his teaching and reject the false prophets.

Having motivated the Thessalonians to further faithfulness by telling them how grateful he was for them, Paul moved to the third major section of the epistle, 2:17–3:13. In this material, he addressed the separation created by his travels. This section also divides into three main parts.

Paul's Absence

In 2:17-3:5, Paul assured the Thessalonians of his continued heartfelt concern for them. And he demonstrated this concern by sending Timothy to visit them. Listen to Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2:

When we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left by ourselves in Athens, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen you and to encourage you in your faith (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2).

In addition to heartfelt pastoral concern, in 3:6-10, Paul expressed his grateful joy at the news that Timothy brought from Thessalonica. The believers were standing firm in their faith, and they missed Paul as much as the apostle missed them. This news thrilled Paul so much that in 1 Thessalonians 3:8-9 he wrote:

For now we live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God for you enough to repay him for all the joy we have ... because of you? (1 Thessalonians 3:8-9).

Hearing the good things Timothy reported turned Paul's worry into joy and confidence.

In the third place, in 3:11-13, Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, asking the Father to "direct the way" for him to visit them again.

Instructions

The fourth major section of this letter runs from 4:1–5:22. As we have already seen, many Thessalonian believers had been so distracted by the idea of Christ's immediate return that they had lost interest in life in the present world. So, Paul gave them a number of instructions meant to correct existing problems and prevent future ones. He did not want the Thessalonians to give up hope in Jesus' return, but he did want them to recognize that Christ might not come back right away. In the interim, he wanted them to live as the Lord had commanded. This section is relatively long and is composed of a brief introduction followed by the main body of Paul's instruction.

First, 4:1-2 introduced the section. Here, Paul commended the Thessalonians as a whole for obeying his earlier commands. Of course, he knew that the temptation to disobey his instructions was strong because his opponents implicitly — perhaps even explicitly — promised freedom from earthly responsibilities and boundaries. So, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that his teaching carried the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ; God himself would take the Thessalonians to task if they neglected his words.

Second, in 4:3–5:22, Paul mentioned a number of specific arenas in which he hoped the Thessalonian Christians would guard against sin and increase their obedience to Christ. As we have mentioned, he paid particular attention to sins that might be promulgated through the false teaching in the Thessalonian church.

Paul began in 4:3-8 with commands to be sexually pure. Historically, sexual immorality has characterized many groups that have believed the end of the world to be at hand. Perhaps the most relevant example can be found in the civic cult of Thessalonica itself, which celebrated the supposed return of the god Cabirus in worship that involved sexually immoral behavior. Paul ended this section with great emphasis by including another assertion of the divine authority behind his words.

In 4:9-10, Paul praised the Thessalonians for their brotherly love, and encouraged them to love all the more. The context of this chapter implies that one concrete way to demonstrate love is to be self-supporting so as to avoid becoming a burden to others.

In 4:11-12, Paul commanded the Thessalonians to engage in meaningful labor and daily work. Some Thessalonian believers had become so enamored with the idea that Jesus would come back in the immediate future that they had ceased working their daily jobs. Because these people were not independently wealthy, they rapidly became a financial burden on the charitable Thessalonian church. Moreover, the laziness they displayed damaged the credibility of the church in the eyes of unbelievers.

In 4:13-18, the apostle exhorted the Thessalonians to encourage each other with the hope of future reunion with their loved ones who had died in the Lord. Sadly, the false teaching in Thessalonica had caused some to fear that no one who died before Jesus returned would be saved.

In 5:1-11, Paul reminded the church that the Lord would condemn the disobedient and reward the faithful when he returned. Far from being a cause for laxity and immorality, Paul wanted to make it clear that the return of Christ should motivate all believers to live holy lives.

In 5:12-13, Paul reasserted the authority of the rightful church leaders in Thessalonica. He had left men in charge who held to sound doctrine, and these men were presumably opposing the false teachers. As a result, the Thessalonian church was receiving mixed messages from its true leaders on the one hand and from their usurpers on the other. Paul made it clear that the teaching of the established leadership was to be followed, and the teaching of the false prophets rejected.

In the remaining verses, Paul dealt with a variety of subjects, all designed to reassert his earlier teachings in this section and to prevent people from overreacting to the problems caused by the false teachers. In 5:14, he indicated that the church should warn rather than coddle those who were lazy. But he did not want them to ostracize everyone who could not support himself, so he also reminded them to minister to the truly needy.

In 5:15 he headed off mistreatment of believers who had fallen under the influence of the false teachers by instructing everyone to repay harm with kindness.

In 5:16-18, Paul encouraged joy in the midst of the difficulties the church was facing, and once again asserted the divine authority behind his teaching.

In 5:19-22, he made it clear that his opposition to the false prophets was not a rejection of all new prophecy and teaching. Rather, all such utterances were to be tested, and only the false discarded.

These extensive instructions touched on many different practical concerns. In each case, Paul's attitude was very positive. The Thessalonians had done well, and Paul commended them for this. But he also urged them to continue growing in their faith and service to Christ.

Now that we've seen an overview of 1 Thessalonians, we should turn to the content and structure of 2 Thessalonians.

2 THESSALONIANS

Second Thessalonians also divides into five main sections: a salutation in 1:1-2; another report of thanksgiving and encouragement in 1:3-10; Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians in 1:11-12; Paul's instructions in 2:1-3:15; and closing material in 3:16-18.

Salutation/Closing

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians begins very much like his first. The salutation is short and direct, and it indicates that the letter was written to the church in Thessalonica. And just as with 1 Thessalonians, the salutation explains that the letter comes not just from Paul, but also from Silas and Timothy. Now again, Silas and Timothy were not infallible and did not write with apostolic authority. Nevertheless, Paul's authorship insures that everything in the letter is true and his authority requires us to obey and believe everything that the letter teaches. In fact, as we look at the letter's short closing, it's clear that Paul is really the primary author. We can discern this because Paul, and only Paul, physically signed the letter in order to authenticate it against counterfeits.

Thanksgiving and Encouragement

In the second section, consisting of 1:3-10, Paul once again reported his thanksgivings for the Thessalonians' faith and love, especially in the face of persecution. Although he had to write to them a second time to address some of the same problems he had confronted in his first letter, Paul was still deeply impressed with the Thessalonians. He also encouraged them by telling them again how exemplary their faith was, and how he had boasted to other churches about their perseverance. Listen to his words in 2 Thessalonians 1:4:

In the churches of God, we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

Prayer

In the third section, found in 1:11-12, Paul explained that he constantly prayed for the Thessalonians, and that they were not alone in their struggles. He, Timothy, and Silas prayed day in and day out that God would work powerfully in them to make sure that they were faithful and fruitful in their service to Christ.

Instructions

The fourth section consists of a series of instructions, running from 2:1–3:15. This long section makes up the major portion of the letter. Paul's instructions divide into three parts. First, in 2:1-17, Paul instructed them about Christ's return. We will look into these verses more carefully later in this lesson, so here we will simply note that Paul denied that Christ had already returned. As he put it in 2:3:

That day will not come unless the rebellion occurs first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

Next, in 3:1-5, Paul asked the Thessalonians to pray for safety and success in ministry for him and his co-workers. Third, in 3:6-15, Paul issued a warning against irresponsibility, telling the Thessalonians to return to work and to earn their own livings. As he put it in 3:10:

For even when we were with you, we commanded this of you: If someone does not want to work, he is not permitted to eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

As we can see, Paul's two brief letters to the Thessalonians are similar in many ways. Both express his confidence and joy in this church, as well as his gratitude for their faithfulness in his absence. Yet, Paul also knew that serious problems had arisen during his absence, so he instructed the Thessalonians not just once, but at least twice, by writing these two letters. His chief concern was that they be faithful to Christ and to his teaching, living responsibly in their daily lives, and gaining a proper outlook on the Lord's return.

Up to this point we have explored the background of Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica and the basic content of these epistles. Now we are in a position to look at our third topic. How did these epistles reflect Paul's central theological doctrine of the "latter days" — his eschatology?

THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS

In his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul addressed specific issues related to their lives. He wrote about false prophets, and about faithful and responsible living, and he also corrected their views on the second coming of Christ. But as we have seen in previous lessons, it is helpful to distinguish the specific teachings Paul included in these letters from the more basic, underlying theological commitments that undergirded everything he taught. As in his other letters, Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians grew out of the heart of his theology, which we have called his eschatology.

You will recall that Paul's eschatology stemmed from common Old Testament outlooks on God's design for history. The vast majority of Jews in the first century believed that history divided into two ages: "this age" and "the age to come." "This age" was a technical term designating the present age of sin, judgment and death. But "the age to come" was the age of ultimate judgment against the enemies of God and final blessings for the people of God. In this perspective, the coming of the Messiah, or Christ, was the turning point between these two ages. When the Messiah came, he would bring the end of this age and introduce the wonders of the age to come.

Now, as followers of Christ, Paul and the other apostles modified this straightforward two-age pattern of history. They knew that Jesus was the Messiah, and that Jesus had inaugurated the age to come. But they also realized that the age to come had not arrived in its fullness and that this age had not ceased to exist. So, they explained that followers of Christ live in a period that may be described as "already and not yet," a time when the coming age of eternal salvation is "already" here in some ways, but "not yet" here in its fullness.

This pattern of eschatology presented some difficult struggles to the early church because it naturally raised the question: How much of the age to come is already here? As Christians sought to answer this question, some of them took rather extreme positions. As we saw in the lesson "Paul and the Galatians," some Christians acted as if the age to come had not arrived in any significant way, underestimating how much Christ had accomplished in his first coming. We called this imbalanced outlook "under-realized eschatology."

In Thessalonica, however, another extreme prevailed. The Thessalonians developed what we might call "overheated eschatology." Under the influence of false prophets, many believed that the consummation of the age to come had already occurred or that it was just around the corner. And because of this, they treated many matters pertaining to life in this age as inconsequential. Paul realized that this "overheated eschatology" had led the Thessalonians into serious problems. So, he wrote to them in order to give them a more balanced outlook on the overlap of this age and the age to come.

Paul responded to the Thessalonians' problem by trying to balance their view of the end times. He did this in at least three important ways. First, he explained the doctrine of salvation in a way that balanced the Thessalonians' eschatology. Second, Paul related his understanding of the end times to Christian morality or ethics. And third, he showed the Thessalonians their historical position relative to the events preceding Christ's return.

Let's look first at the ways Paul's doctrine of salvation helped the Thessalonians find balance in their eschatology.

DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Paul attempted to cool off the Thessalonians' overheated eschatology by drawing their attention to dimensions of salvation in Christ they had largely ignored. Under the influence of false prophets, many Thessalonians had almost completely identified salvation with the blessings that will come with the return of Christ. Nothing else mattered except the salvation that would come at Christ's return. To counter this overemphasis on the future, Paul pointed out that the salvation that will be applied when Christ returns depends upon the salvation that has already taken place. 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 offer a helpful statement of the outlooks Paul wanted the Thessalonians to have. Listen to his words there:

But we should always thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation through the holiness of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

Much could be said about these verses, but we will take note of three dimensions of salvation presented here. We will first see how Paul drew attention to salvation in the past, then we will turn our attention to his concern with future salvation, and finally we will explore how this passage touches on present or current dimensions of salvation. Let's look first at the way Paul described salvation in the past.

Past Salvation

With regard to past dimensions of salvation, Paul spoke of God's choice, or election, of the Thessalonians. Paul said that God "chose" the Thessalonians, meaning that before the Thessalonians came to faith through Paul's preaching of the gospel, God had already decided that he loved the Thessalonians and was going to save them. This choice was actually made even before God created the world. Listen to how Paul talked about God's election of people to salvation in Ephesians 1:4:

He chose us in [Christ], before the creation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless in his sight (Ephesians 1:4).

This idea seems to be present also in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, where Paul wrote:

God chose you from the beginning for salvation through the holiness of the Spirit and through belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Paul's point is clear: the Thessalonians' were saved because God chose them for salvation. Salvation is not founded on choices that human beings make in history, but on the eternal will of God.

Now, it's important to realize that, for Paul, election was not a disconnected, capricious act. As we have already read in Ephesians 1:4, God's choice was made "in Christ." And as we have seen in other lessons, to be "in Christ" is to be in union with Jesus, so that as he passed from this age into the next through his death and resurrection, we too, because we are united to him, pass from this age into the age to come. So, when Paul reminded the Thessalonians of their election, he had in mind that God had chosen them to be united with Jesus and to pass with him out of this age and into the age to come.

This is why Paul also wrote of another dimension of the Thessalonians' salvation that had occurred in the past: their conversion. Notice that in 2 Thessalonians 2:14 Paul said that "God called you to this through our gospel." Paul had "called" the Thessalonians to salvation "through [his] gospel." Here Paul referred to the time when he had preached the gospel of Christ to the Thessalonians during his second missionary journey. They had heard and believed the good news of Christ, and this initial reaction to the gospel had brought salvation to them.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, Paul spoke of salvation as something that took place both in the eternal choice of God and also when the Thessalonians first believed.

We know ... his choice of you, because our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in the power of the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

The Thessalonians' conversion proved that God had already chosen them for salvation. By mentioning these past dimensions of salvation that had already been realized in the lives of the Thessalonians, Paul reaffirmed the gospel he had already preached to them, and assured them that they had already experienced certain aspects of salvation.

Future Salvation

A second way Paul drew attention to salvation in his letters to the Thessalonians was by focusing on the future dimensions of their salvation. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 Paul wrote that believers are

To await [God's] Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, the one who rescues us from the coming wrath (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

In much the same way, in 2 Thessalonians 2:14, he indicated that the ultimate end of divine redemption is

Obtain[ing] the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

Despite the fact that the Thessalonians were overly concerned with the return of Christ, Paul acknowledged that Christ's future return would bring salvation to its completion. As the Thessalonians knew all too well, the ultimate goal of salvation is final deliverance from divine wrath and the glorification of Christ's followers. Paul was not afraid to admit that in the future we will experience a radical and complete transformation into a state of unimaginable honor and glory as we reign with Christ in the new heavens and new earth.

Present Salvation

In the third place, in addition to mentioning the past and future aspects of salvation, Paul also spoke of salvation as an ongoing, present reality. He mentioned this dimension of salvation in two ways in 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

God chose you to be saved through the sanctification of the Holy Spirit and through belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

On the one hand, Paul pointed out that salvation was coming to the Thessalonians "through the sanctification of the Spirit." As we have seen in other lessons, a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit among God's people occurred when Christ ascended on high. And Paul pointed out that this was a blessing of the age to come. In fact, in Ephesians 1:14 he called the Holy Spirit the "down-payment" of our future inheritance in the great age to come. So, when he mentioned the Spirit at work in the Thessalonians, Paul drew their attention to the astounding fact that they were already experiencing a measure of the inheritance they so eagerly awaited.

The ministry of the Spirit is extremely important during the time when this age and the age to come overlap. The corruption of this age of sin and death continually seeks to destroy believers. But as our foretaste of the age to come, the Spirit constantly purifies us and separates us from the corruption of the world.

On the other hand, Paul also pointed to present dimensions of salvation by mentioning that we are saved "through belief in the truth" in 2 Thessalonians 2:13. Here he spoke of the responsibility of all believers to maintain their commitments to God and the Christian faith, encouraging the Thessalonians to turn from false prophecy and to love the truth that he delivered to them. Continual belief in the truth was an essential dimension of Christ's present saving work in their lives.

Throughout the history of the church, there have been groups of Christians who, like the Thessalonians, have focused so much attention on the second coming of Christ that they have failed to realize the privileges and responsibilities that result from the past and present dimensions of salvation. Although we never want to lose sight of the return of Christ in glory, we should always remember how much God has already done for us and realize how much he continues to do for us.

MORALITY

Paul countered the overheated eschatology in Thessalonica not only by emphasizing the past and present aspects of salvation, but also by stressing ethical Christian living. To see how his ethical teaching reflected his eschatology, we will look at two topics: the process of salvation, and the implication to live ethically. Let's look first at the way Paul's eschatology demonstrated a progression from past and present dimensions of salvation to future blessings.

Process of Salvation

Paul revealed a rather full picture of the process of salvation in 2 Thessalonians 2:14.

He called you to this through our gospel, that you might obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

Paul wrote that the Thessalonians were sanctified and believed the truth in order that they might "obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul expressed a similar idea in his prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:13:

May [the Lord] strengthen your hearts to be blameless in holiness in the presence of our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones (1 Thessalonians 3:13).

The Thessalonians yearned for Christ's return with all his holy ones, and Paul affirmed this desire. But he also prayed that they would be strengthened in their daily commitment to Christ so that when Christ did return, the Thessalonians would be found acceptable in his sight. Future salvation in eternal glory is the end or goal of a process. God designed our past and present experiences of salvation to lead to the future stage of salvation. And without the past and present stages, future salvation cannot be reached.

Ethical Implications

In describing the past, present and future aspects of salvation, Paul indicated that one necessary step in that process was day-to-day ethical living. In short, he wrote that professing believers who do not live righteously cannot complete the process, because they have never really begun it. By pressing this point, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that, although they were right to hope for the blessings of Christ's return, they also needed to concentrate on the present circumstances of their lives if they hoped to receive those future blessings.

Now, we can be sure from other passages that Paul did not believe it was possible for true believers in Christ to lose their salvation. For instance, in Philippians 1:6 Paul assured the Philippians in this way:

He who began a good work in you will continue to perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6).

Yet, listen to the way Paul exhorted them in 1 Thessalonians 5:5-9:

You are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night or darkness. Therefore, let us not sleep like the others, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But we are of the day, so let us be sober, having put on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer his wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:5-9).

Paul's basic threefold view of salvation appears again in this passage. In the past, the Thessalonians had become "sons of light and sons of day." They had already received this special status in the eyes of God, and they had become faithful, loving and hopeful of salvation. Because they had experienced salvation in the past, Paul insisted that they had an obligation to continue in salvation in the present: "let us be alert and sober." And beyond this, Paul stated that the reason Christians must remain alert and sober, steadfast in faith, hope and love, is that our future salvation depends upon it. God has not appointed us to suffer his wrath, but to receive salvation. But he has also appointed our present faithfulness as the means to obtaining our future salvation.

In light of this, Paul included many moral instructions in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. For example, as we have already seen in 1 Thessalonians 4:3–5:22, he exhorted them — obtain gainful employment, abstain from sexual immorality, love and encourage each other, repay harm with kindness, and live holy lives.

These and other specific instructions to the Thessalonians rose out of Paul's firm conviction that Christians live in a time when salvation is already a present reality. Paul's eschatology demonstrated a progression from past and present dimensions of salvation to future blessings.

HISTORICAL POSITION

A third way Paul sought to correct the Thessalonians' overheated eschatology was in his description of their historical position relative to the events preceding Christ's return. You will recall that a number of believers in Thessalonica were confused about historical events that were to accompany the Lord's return. Some of them had even been tricked into thinking that Christ had already returned, and that they had missed his coming. Others believed that although Christ had not yet come, he would certainly arrive in the immediate future.

Paul responded to these mistaken ideas by reminding the Thessalonians that several events had to precede Christ's return — and that these events had yet to transpire. Listen to what he wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8:

With respect to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ... That day will not come unless the rebellion occurs first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction ... For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but the restrainer will hold it back until he is taken out of the way. Then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will do away with by the breath of his mouth and destroy by the appearance of his coming (2 Thessalonians 2:1-8).

This passage has fascinated interpreters since the earliest days of the church and there have been many different opinions on what it means. In general terms, we may say that Paul taught the Thessalonians that their overheated eschatology was misguided because certain events had to take place before Christ returned in glory. According to this passage, at least four things had to happen before Christ returned: the mystery of lawlessness had to be working and restrained; a rebellion or apostasy had to occur; the restrainer had to be removed; and the man of lawlessness had to be revealed.

Interpreters have understood these four elements in many different ways, and we will not be able to settle every matter to everyone's satisfaction here. So, at this point we will simply present some widely held views that seem most convincing to us.

Mystery of Lawlessness Restrained

In the first place, Paul stated that the “mystery of lawlessness” was already working, and that it was restrained. But he did not identify this mystery or the restrainer. However, in 2 Thessalonians 2:7-9, Paul explicitly associated the mystery with the church's archenemy, Satan. This gives us a hint that it may well be demonic in nature. Consider also that Paul described the church as being in conflict primarily with spiritual beings, and not with earthly rulers. As he wrote in Ephesians 6:12:

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers ... authorities ... world powers ... spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).

Paul did not deny that demonic powers have earthly counterparts, such as wicked human governments and individuals who turned from Christ. But he encouraged believers to think first in terms of demonic activity and to view earthly conflicts as an extension of spiritual war.

Moreover, throughout his letters Paul frequently mentioned details of spiritual warfare that parallel the mystery and the restrainer. For example, in Colossians 2:15-20 and in Galatians 4:8-9, he taught that Christ's crucifixion had “disarmed” the demons that had held power over many believers before they had come to faith, and that the Holy

Spirit's ministry had freed believers from these weakened false gods. Essentially, these demonic forces were still active, but they were restrained by God's power.

For these reasons, it seems best to view the "mystery of lawlessness" as a demonic force that exercises power in the heavenly realms, opposing God, empowering false teachers, and promoting false religion. Correspondingly, the "restrainer," or perhaps the "restraint," would also be active primarily in the spiritual world, being perhaps an angel or group of angels, or even the Holy Spirit himself.

Rebellion or Apostasy

Secondly, Paul assured the Thessalonians that Christ would not return until the time of the "rebellion" or "apostasy." Because the restrainer was still active when Paul wrote, the rebellion had not yet taken place; therefore, Christ had not yet returned. It seems best to understand this "rebellion" or "apostasy" as equivalent to what John calls "the battle" throughout Revelation. In Revelation 16:14 it is "the battle of the great day of God Almighty." In Revelation 19:19 it is "war against the rider on the horse." In Revelation 20:8-9 the battle is "[against] the holy camp and the beloved city." This rebellion consists of the massing of the forces of evil against God on the final Day of the Lord. It will not occur until the end of the age. And at that time, Christ will utterly destroy all who have risen up against him.

Restrainer Removed

Beyond this, Paul indicated that the rebellion could never take place until the "restrainer" or "restraint" ceased to hold back the mystery of lawlessness. Because the Thessalonians were aware of the active and ongoing work of the restrainer, they had no need to fear that they had missed Christ's arrival.

Man of Lawlessness Revealed

Finally, Paul mentioned that Christ would not return until the man of lawlessness was revealed. From Paul's description in 2 Thessalonians 2:4-9, the man of lawlessness would appear to be a sort of parody of the incarnate Jesus Christ. For example, verse 8 says that, like Jesus, he will be "revealed." Verse 6 indicates that he will come "in his own time." According to verse 9, his "coming" will be accompanied by "signs, powers and wonders." And verse 4 says that he will actually proclaim himself to be divine.

Many suggestions have been made regarding the identity of the man of lawlessness. Some have thought him to be a specific political figure, such as Roman emperor Nero Claudius Caesar in the first century. Others have thought him to be a type of political figure that is repeated in every age. For example, although Nero was the first tyrannical persecutor of the church, he was later followed by emperors like Marcus Aurelius, who was also no friend of the church.

Perhaps the best explanation is that the man of lawlessness is a single human figure, yet to be revealed, who will be influential in the last generation before Christ returns, the one whom John called the “antichrist” in 1 John 2:18.

Now, although scholars disagree regarding the precise meaning of each of these elements we have mentioned, we can at least be sure of the larger point Paul was making: Some of the Thessalonians had gone so far in their fervor for the return of Christ that they believed that Jesus had already returned, and that they had not been glorified with him as promised. So, Paul reiterated that a number of things had to happen before the Second Coming of Christ. Since these things had not transpired, it was clear that Jesus had not returned.

Paul pointed out that Christ’s return was further away than the Thessalonians thought in order to open their eyes to the significance of their present lives. And for the same reasons, whenever we are so concerned with the nearness of Christ’s return that we are tempted to neglect this life, we need to remember how important it is that we engage in the responsibilities and struggles of life in the “already but not yet.”

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have seen how Paul responded to the problems that arose in the church of Thessalonica. We have explored the background of his relationship with the Thessalonians. And we have seen the content of his letters to the Thessalonians. Finally, we have seen how Paul applied the heart of his theology to the problems in Thessalonica, calling on believers to cool down their overheated eschatology and to give proper attention to life in the here and now.

As we reflect on Paul’s responses to the Thessalonians, we see how his eschatology resolved many of their practical problems, and also how it can guide us today. Many Christians today still focus inappropriately on Christ’s return, ignoring the importance of the present. But Christ has not called us to treat our current responsibilities in his kingdom as irrelevant. Rather, he has appointed this as a time for us to remain faithful to him, to grow in sanctification, and to be his witnesses in the world. The heart of Paul’s theology speaks to us today just as it did to the Thessalonians back then. It encourages us to remain faithful and holy while we await our Lord’s return and the fullness of the age to come.

Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host) is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).