

The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson 3

Paul and the Thessalonians

Manuscript



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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?" 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, for many years, almost all of us have to fulfill many responsibilities before we can retire.

As strange as it may sound, that young man's attitude came very close to the attitudes of some Christians living in the city of Thessalonica in the first century. They became so preoccupied with wanting to experience the glory at Christ's second coming that they failed to realize the many responsibilities God had called them to fulfill *before* that glorious day.

This third lesson of our series on *The Heart of Paul's Theology* is entitled, "Paul and the Thessalonians." In this lesson, we'll see how some first-century Christians in the city of Thessalonica faced serious problems because they thought that Christ's return was extremely close at hand. We'll also look at how Paul responded to this misguided belief.

As we learned in our earlier lessons, all faithful Jews in Paul's day believed that when the Messiah came, he would fulfill all of God's purposes for his creation. Now, on the basis of Christ's teaching, Paul taught that Christ had inaugurated the last days in his first advent. He also taught that the last days in Christ would continue throughout the history of the church. And he explained that Christ would complete the transformation of creation at the consummation in his second advent. For the most part, early Christians understood that Christ's kingdom would unfold in this way, but many were still confused. How much had Christ already accomplished? How soon would he return?

We saw in a previous lesson that the churches of Galatia were tempted to force Gentile Christians to be circumcised because they underestimated how much Christ had already transformed the world. But in this lesson, we'll see a different problem. Many Christians in the city of Thessalonica had come to believe that Christ's return was very near. They became so preoccupied with this belief that they no longer saw any reason to fulfill their daily responsibilities as Christ's followers. So, Paul wrote letters to the Thessalonian Christians to call them back to faithful Christian living.

Our study of Paul and the Thessalonians will divide into three parts. First, we'll investigate the background of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Second, we'll examine the structure and content of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. And third, we'll see how these letters from Paul applied his central theological outlooks on Christian eschatology to the church in Thessalonica. Let's look first at the background to Paul's letters to the Thessalonians.

BACKGROUND

As we've emphasized throughout this series, the apostle Paul wrote his letters 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 address these questions first by exploring the background of Paul's second missionary journey. Then we'll delve into some specific 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 15:36–18:22. 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 Bithynia to the north. But the Holy Spirit did not permit him. So, the company went from Phrygia to the coastal port of Troas, about three hundred 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 Thessalonian Jews and 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. In all events, Paul came to love the Thessalonian Christians and to be encouraged by their devotion to Christ. Eventually, however, some unbelieving Jews became jealous of the gospel's success in Thessalonica 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 the last phases of Paul's second missionary journey that he 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 to Paul, probably in A.D. 50 or 51, Paul was most likely already in Corinth. Apparently, Timothy told Paul a lot of encouraging news about the Thessalonian Christians, but he also reported a number of serious misunderstandings and practical problems that had arisen in their church. Paul most likely wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth, shortly after Timothy's arrival, to address these issues. And 2 Thessalonians was probably written a few months later, also from Corinth.

When you read Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, you see two things. One, he has concerns for some of the things that are happening within the life of the church there. Things are not perfect, but yet, at the same time, Paul has this amazing affection for them. You know, he speaks about how he prays for them consistently, and the love he has for them, and how honored he is that they have sought to imitate his faith in every way that they can. And I think that's what's really at the heart of it, that these are folks who Paul, many of whom, he brought to faith in Christ, who he has taught, he has mentored, and there is this bond that he has with them because of that relationship and he loves them because of their faith and their desire to follow Christ. But like any church — even we see this in just about every letter that Paul writes — there are always going to be issues, there are always going to be problems and difficulties. And Paul is never going to abandon a group of people because they're not one-hundred percent in line with everything that he taught. His love for them

supersedes that, and it is because of that bond that they have in Christ and because he is really, in many respects, their pastor.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

Now that we've seen the background of Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians within the broader context of his second missionary journey, we should look more specifically at the problems that grew within the church of Thessalonica. What issues concerned Paul? What was so serious that he wrote to the Thessalonians not once but twice?

PROBLEMS IN THESSALONICA

Paul touched on a number of themes in 1 and 2 Thessalonians that appear in his other epistles as well. But we should always remind ourselves that Paul wrote his letters to address the concrete pastoral needs of specific churches, as well as groups and individuals within those churches. Paul deeply loved the Thessalonian Christians because of the time he spent with them during his second missionary journey. But after Paul had left Thessalonica, his protégé, Timothy alerted Paul to some serious problems that had arisen among the Thessalonian believers.

As in every situation, there were many interwoven problems in Thessalonica. But three main difficulties move to the foreground in Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians: first, the struggle of persecution; second, the rise of false prophets within the church; and third, some issues of practical Christian living that resulted from the misguided teachings of these false prophets. Let's turn our attention first to the problem of persecution.

Persecution

When Paul first brought the gospel to Thessalonica, the believers there suffered violence for their faith. A good number of them had endured serious, life-threatening persecution. Listen to Luke's description of events in Thessalonica recorded in Acts 17:5:

The Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, 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 from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came 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 from your own countrymen as [the churches in Judea] did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles 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.

When we think about the persecution of the church, the church was persecuted tremendously not only in the apostle Paul's day, but in the day... on the day of Pentecost, when the church got its marching orders, was empowered by God, it started that very moment to experience persecution... And so, when we think about how the church has been ostracized, criticized, maligned on every corner, we do understand that this same church that Jesus put forth into action is the same church that is working today. Look how much it has sustained and how much it has gone through, yet it is still there. And let me go a little step further. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Word that became flesh — they couldn't kill him then, they can't kill him now. So, we are part of, we are the church that is his church, and he will not allow anything, not even the very gates of Hell to prevail and stop his mission.

— Dr. Willie Wells, Jr.

In addition to suffering persecution, the Thessalonian church had also come under the influence of false prophets.

False Prophets

In some ways, the appearance of false prophets in the church is not surprising. Throughout history, when Christians have suffered persecution for long periods of time,

they have focused on Jesus' return to deliver them from their trials. Suffering Christians often orient their entire lives toward the second coming of Christ. When this life offers little more than disappointment and suffering, it's common for us to turn our eyes toward the day when Jesus will rescue us. But more than this, when Christians become highly preoccupied with the return of Christ, they often become susceptible to false teachers or false prophets who promise that Christ's return is imminent. And this is precisely what happened to the Thessalonians.

To appreciate how much trouble the false teachers in Thessalonica stirred up, we'll 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 conflict with Paul.

Conflict. It's 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, but test everything; hold fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).

Paul instructed the Thessalonians to "test everything" and to "hold fast what is 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, by the time Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, it appears that they had forged letters under Paul's name in an attempt to persuade the Thessalonians of their views. Paul expressed his concern about forgeries in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2:

We ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

The problem of forgeries is also apparent in 2 Thessalonians 3:17, where he wrote:

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

Paul added words to 2 Thessalonians written by his own hand as a signature that distinguished his letters from forgeries. He did this to help the Thessalonians identify

letters that were genuinely his.

The most obvious reason someone would want to forge a letter in somebody else's name is to gain the authority of that individual, and so, therefore, maybe a student of Paul's, or even more insidious, an enemy of the faith, may want to squeeze some things into the church with authority that they couldn't do on their own, and therefore, they might use Paul's name in this case. Some have argued that this was a well-known feature of ancient literature, that you could write in other people's names ... and if that's the case, it's very difficult to explain positive motives for this type of thing, unless again, you can prove that this was commonly known and done this way. But I think most people now feel — or I should say, most evangelical scholars now feel — that this would not be the case. It has to be, if there was a forgery, it would be somebody who's trying to do something to use Paul's authority, whether good or bad reasons.

— Dr. Joseph D. Fantin

This conflict that Paul had with the false prophets raises another issue for us as we read Paul's letters to the Thessalonians: What were these false prophets teaching?

Teaching. We cannot be sure of everything the false prophets 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. Above all, they taught that Jesus would return almost immediately. In fact, as incredible as it may seem, some false prophets even proclaimed that Christ had already returned.

Listen to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter ... to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one 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's possible that these false prophets drew their 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 introduced this kind of outlook to the Christian church by telling the Thessalonians that Christ had already returned. Whatever the source of these errors, Paul strongly condemned the false prophets and instructed the Thessalonians to hold fast to what he

had taught them about the return of Christ.

No one knows the time when Jesus returns, and so we do not set dates, and we can help our friends who have been fooled or are thinking about possibly being fooled by false teachers who are setting dates in order to make money or to scare people, or whatever their motives and purposes are. So, the time of Jesus' second coming is tricky. We should live, looking for him to come. The Lord says certain things have to happen before he comes. But most importantly, we do not know that time, so we leave it to the Lord, and we get on with the business of loving him and living for him.

— Dr. Robert A. Peterson

Now that we've seen how the problems of persecution and false prophets had come to the Thessalonians, we should look at some practical issues concerning Christian living and the ways these issues impacted the church.

Christian Living

A number of significant concerns appear in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, but we'll focus on two: discouragement and irresponsibility. Let's look first at the Thessalonians' discouragement.

Discouragement. When Christians become convinced that Jesus' return is just around the corner, they often experience a lot of excitement at first. But when predictions about Jesus' imminent return fail to be fulfilled, they are disappointed and discouraged. In Thessalonica, many believers had suffered persecution because of their faith in Christ. And under the influence of false prophets, they had oriented their entire lives around the hope of the immediate return of Christ. Yet, as the months went by, nothing changed. As a number of their fellow believers passed away, those who remained alive even worried about the eternal fate of these 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 uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep (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.

We have to think about how the unexpected delay of God's kingdom, how it affected the outlook of the original audience... Christ had ascended, the Gospels testify to that. The apostles were testifying to that, and there are things in the Gospels, and even in the apostle Paul, that might be understood as saying that Christ would come again soon, and so, as those first-century Christians were openly professing Christ as Lord and beginning to experience persecution, hardship, even just the normal difficulties of regular economic upheaval and displacement, they could have wondered, had the promise of Jesus to return again, had it failed? ... They needed some hope; they needed some confidence that even though things hadn't happened the way they expected them, that the promises of God had not failed and that they could stand firm — and this is how they were to respond to the situation — they were to stand firm in their faith knowing that Christ had overcome.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

In addition to discouragement, the message of the false prophets had led to irresponsible living.

Irresponsibility. 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 work hard at your job? Would you repair your house? Would you build schools for your children? If you were fully convinced that Jesus would return in just a matter of days, normal activities would no longer seem very important. This is what happened in Thessalonica. The false prophets convinced some of the Christians there that they no longer needed to support themselves and to engage in normal godly living. Their attitude was "Why bother with these kinds of things when Jesus is coming back so soon?" This is why in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 Paul wrote this:

Aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

Unfortunately, even after Paul had encouraged attention to daily affairs in his first letter, 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 3:6-12 he wrote:

We command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us... For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to

work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

False prophecies about Christ's imminent return had caused the Thessalonians to become lazy and idle. And, as we'll see in a moment, idleness led to a host of other problems. Paul recognized a number of interrelated problems that had risen among the Christians in Thessalonica. Persecution had opened the way for false prophets to create false expectations for the immediate return of Christ. And those false expectations had led to the practical problems of discouragement and irresponsibility. Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians to help the Thessalonian Christians overcome these difficult problems.

Now that we've seen some of the circumstances that form the background to Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians, we're ready to look more carefully at the structure and content of these letters. What did Paul write to the Thessalonians? How did he address the problems they faced?

STRUCTURE & CONTENT

Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians are remarkably similar in many ways. In both letters he called for the Thessalonian believers to remain faithful to what he had taught them, to reject false prophets and to live responsibly in their daily lives. So, why did Paul write a second letter? As we mentioned a moment ago, one element that only appears in 2 Thessalonians is Paul's warning against forgeries. It's likely that the false prophets in Thessalonica attempted to maintain their influence on the church by producing letters in support of their views that they claimed came from Paul. Apparently, this tactic was successful to some extent, and it led the apostle to write to the Thessalonians a second time.

We'll briefly explore each letter to the Thessalonians by summarizing the contents of their major sections. Let's begin with 1 Thessalonians.

1 THESSALONIANS

Paul's first letter to the 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.

Let's look first at Paul's salutation and closing remarks.

Salutation (1:1) & Closing Remarks (5:23-28)

As in many of Paul's letters, the first and last sections of 1 Thessalonians are fairly brief and straightforward. A salutation in 1:1 states that the letter is addressed to the Thessalonians and that it comes from Paul. Interestingly, it also mentions Silas and Timothy as coauthors. This is why on a number of occasions, 1 Thessalonians speaks of "we" and "us," meaning Paul along with Timothy and Silas. Of course, Silas and Timothy didn't share Paul's apostolic authority, so it's on the basis of Paul's authority alone that this letter is included in the New Testament. The closing remarks in 5:23-28 are also rather simple. This passage includes a benediction, a request for prayer, and a final greeting.

Thanksgiving (1:2–2:16)

When we move to the second section of 1 Thessalonians — a report of thanksgiving in 1:2–2:16 — 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.

Endurance Through Suffering (1:2-10). First, in 1:2-10, Paul explained that he thanked God for the Thessalonians' endurance through suffering. As we've seen, unbelieving Jews and Gentiles persecuted the believers in Thessalonica, but these believers didn't 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, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

Paul was grateful to God that the Thessalonians responded to persecution joyfully, and that their faithfulness during these hard times was a model for others to follow.

Firsthand Knowledge (2:1-12). Second, in 2:1-12, Paul continued by expressing gratitude for the Thessalonians' firsthand knowledge of him. Their personal knowledge of Paul was important because false prophets had challenged Paul's motives. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9-10 he wrote these words:

For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you

the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers (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 abused his authority over them. Apparently, at least some in the church had begun to believe these false accusations. For this reason, Paul told them how happy he was that they had seen with their own eyes how “holy and righteous and blameless” he and his companions had been. They knew him well enough to reject every false accusation.

Recognition of Authority (2:13-16). In much the same way, in the third section of Paul's 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 for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

The Thessalonians had received Paul's teaching as the very word of God. And this gave him confidence that the true believers among them would remain faithful to his teaching and reject the false prophets.

Paul's response to people had a whole lot more to do about how they received the word that he spoke than how they may have received him personally. You know, he said in Philippians that even if people aren't particularly embracing him, that if the word of Christ is going forth, he rejoiced in that. But in the case of the Thessalonians, they received Paul personally, but they received the word that he brought with great joy... Paul was so thrilled with the way these folks received the word of God that was sent to them through his ambassadorship, through the message that he brought to them, and that they were people moving in progress; not so much about “where we are” but about “where we're heading.” And these Thessalonians had embraced the truth and they were moving forward to live in that truth, and that thrilled the soul of the apostle Paul, as it would any faithful pastor.

— Rev. Dan Hendley

Paul's Absence (2:17–3:13)

Having motivated the Thessalonians to further faithfulness by telling them how grateful he was for them, Paul moved to the third major section of his epistle. In this

material, he addressed his absence from Thessalonica in 2:17–3:13. Apparently, questions had been raised as to why Paul had left the Thessalonian believers and traveled elsewhere.

Concern (2:17–3:5). Paul addressed this concern in three main ways. In the first place, 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 bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2).

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

For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake? (1 Thessalonians 3:8-9).

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

Prayer (3:11-13). In the third place, in 3:11-13, Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, asking the Father to “direct our way” for him to visit them again.

At the end of chapter 3 of 1 Thessalonians, Paul gives what almost seems like a benediction to the Thessalonians of his desire for them to grow in holiness in Christ and to live a blameless life in Christ. Because he wants them to succeed. He wants them to be a great witness for Christ. And he wants them to enjoy all of the blessings that come with being a follower of Christ. And so, I think you see the real love that Paul has for them poured out in those words because it shows what he ultimately wants them to become and how he wants them to succeed. And all the problems that they may be having in the moment, that's not going to deflect that love at all. In fact, if anything, I think it stirs it up even more that he yearns for them to really be conformed into holiness and Christ-likeness for their own well-being and their own joy.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

Instructions (4:1–5:22)

The fourth major section of 1 Thessalonians runs from 4:1–5:22 and conveys Paul's instructions for the Thessalonian church. As we've already mentioned, many Thessalonian believers had been so distracted by the idea of Christ's immediate return that they'd lost interest in following the teachings of Christ and his apostles in the present world. So, Paul gave them a number of specific instructions. 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 called for them to live as the Lord had commanded.

This section outlining Paul's instructions for the Thessalonians is relatively long, and can be divided into three main parts. The first part, in 4:1-12, deals with ethical living. The second part, in 4:13–5:11, considers the return of Christ. And the third part, in 5:12-22, offers final instructions. Let's look at each part, starting with Paul's instructions for ethical living.

Ethical Living (4:1-12). We'll consider Paul's instructions for ethical living in four segments, starting with a brief introduction in 4:1, 2. In the introduction, 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 admonish the Thessalonians if they neglected his words.

Following the introduction, Paul continued his call for ethical living by commanding the Thessalonian Christians to be sexually pure in 4:3-8. Paul frequently urged the Thessalonian believers to guard against sin and increase their obedience to Christ. And, as we've already mentioned, he paid particular attention to sins that might be promulgated through the false teachers in the Thessalonian church. For this reason, he directly addressed the need for sexual purity in the church.

As strange as it may seem to many of us, throughout history, sexual immorality has characterized many religious groups that believed the end of the world was at hand. And we should add that the Thessalonians lived in a culture where the practices of fertility religion often included sexual immorality. Perhaps the most relevant example can be found in the civic cult of Thessalonica itself. This cult celebrated the supposed return of the god Cabirus through worship that involved sexually immoral behavior. And in this setting, even followers of Christ were tempted to succumb to sexual immorality. This was such a problem that Paul ended this portion with another assertion of the divine authority behind his words.

After his introduction and call for sexual purity, Paul turned his discussion of ethical living to a commendation of the Thessalonians' brotherly love in 4:9, 10. Paul praised the Thessalonians for their brotherly love, and encouraged them to love all the more. The larger context of this chapter implies that one concrete way the Thessalonians needed to demonstrate love was to be self-supporting so as to avoid becoming a burden to others.

Following his focus on brotherly love, in 4:11, 12, Paul explicitly commanded the Thessalonians to engage in meaningful labor and daily work. Some in the church at Thessalonica had become so enamored with the idea that Jesus was coming back in the immediate future that they had stopped working their daily jobs. But these people were not independently wealthy, and they became a financial burden on others in the Thessalonian church. And more than this, the laziness of some in the church damaged the credibility of the church in the eyes of unbelievers.

Having offered instructions for ethical living, Paul then turned to the return of Christ in 4:13–5:11.

Return of Christ (4:13–5:11). Paul instructed the Thessalonians about Christ's return in two ways. First, he talked about the dead in Christ in 4:13-18. The apostle began by exhorting the Thessalonians to encourage each other with the hope of a future reunion with their loved ones who had died in the Lord. Apparently, the false teachers in Thessalonica were claiming that only those who were alive at Christ's return would receive eternal salvation. This false teaching had left some fearing that their friends and family members who had already passed away would miss out on the glories of Christ's return. So, Paul corrected this false view.

For Paul, resurrection wasn't a myth, it wasn't some vague spiritual hope, but confidence that one day our physical bodies would be raised in history, in time and space. Paul believed that the resurrection, the future resurrection of believers, was also a source of great strength for the present, and so Paul could look forward to our future resurrection as a way of comforting people who are grieving the loss of loved ones. First Thessalonians 4 is a great example of this, where Paul says those who are sorrowing because their loved ones have passed away, they need to understand that Jesus is going to come and raise us from the dead. It's not just future blessing, but it gives us strength to face grief and sorrow in the present.

— Dr. Jimmy Agan

Once Paul had encouraged his original audience concerning those who had died in Christ, he then pointed them to the Day of the Lord in 5:1-11. Paul called for the Thessalonians to remain faithful to his teachings by reminding them 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.

Final Instructions (5:12-22). Paul not only discussed ethical living and the return of Christ, but he also gave some final instructions in 5:12-22. Paul's final instructions began in 5:12 and 13 with affirming the ecclesiastical authority in the Thessalonian church.

To guard against the false teachers, Paul reasserted the authority of the

trustworthy church leaders he had established in Thessalonica. Paul 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 leaders he had ordained was to be followed, and the teaching of the false prophets rejected.

Finally, following his affirmation of the ecclesiastical authority in the church, Paul gave a brief summary of his earlier teachings in 5:14-22. In 5:14, Paul 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 themselves, so he also reminded them to be sure 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.

Paul's 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.

So, in the New Testament, Paul says in a number of places that you labor to please God, and that's one of the signs that you love him. And in 1 Thessalonians he tells folk who are already pleasing God, do it more and more because that's the way to advance in love. And that means in godliness, and that means in fellowship with the Father and the Son, which after all, is going to be, quite literally, our eternal life. It starts here; it goes on forever in glory.

— Dr. J.I. Packer

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

2 THESSALONIANS

As we're about to see, Paul's second letter to the Thessalonian church is very similar to his first. This letter 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.

We'll start with the salutation and closing.

Salutation (1:1-2) & Closing (3:16-18)

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians begins very much like his first. The salutation, in 1:1, 2, is short and direct. It indicates that the letter was written to the church in Thessalonica and, just as in 1 Thessalonians, the salutation explains that the letter comes not just from Paul, but also from Silas and Timothy. Paul's authorship ensures that everything in the letter is true and that his authority requires us to obey and believe everything the letter teaches. In fact, as we look at the letter's short closing, in 3:16-18, it's clear in these verses that Paul was the primary author. Paul, and only Paul, physically signed the letter to authenticate it against counterfeits.

Thanksgiving & Encouragement (1:3-10)

In the second section, in 1:3-10, Paul once again reported his thanksgiving and encouragement for the Thessalonians' faith and love, especially in the face of persecution. Although he felt the need to write to them a second time to address some of the same problems, he remained deeply impressed with the Thessalonians. And he 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:

We ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

Paul's Prayer (1:11-12)

In the third section, in 1:11 and 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 (2:1–3:15)

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.

Christ's Return (2:1-17). First, in 2:1-17, Paul instructed the Thessalonians again about Christ's return. We'll look into these verses more carefully later in this lesson, so here we'll simply note that Paul forcefully denied that Christ had already returned. As he put it in 2:3:

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

Safety and Success (3:1-5). Second, in 3:1-5, Paul asked the Thessalonians to pray for safety and success in ministry for him and his co-workers.

Irresponsibility (3:6-15). Third, in 3:6-15, Paul issued a warning against irresponsibility, telling the Thessalonians to return to work and to earn their own livings. In 3:10 he wrote:

For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

So, 2 Thessalonians 3:10 ... Paul is putting forth a notion or an idea that is essential and necessary for societies of any type to function and to flourish. The church was a particular society of people, and they were admonished to care for the poor and needy among them. But I think he recognizes the holistic nature of human beings, and that if we provide for somebody who is able to work without them working, we may be feeding their bodies, but we're doing harm to their souls... The greater expression of tough love is to say, "Brother, Sister, we're happy to share with you, to share our food with you and what we have with you, but you have responsibilities as well. So, grow up, own your responsibilities, and join in with the family of God, not simply with the privileges, but with the responsibilities."

— Rev. Dan Hendley

As we can see, Paul's two brief letters to the Thessalonians are similar in many ways. Both express his confidence and joy in the Thessalonian church, as well as his gratitude for their faithfulness in his absence. Yet, Paul knew that his first letter had not solved the problems in the church at Thessalonica. So, he wrote a second time. His chief concern was that they be faithful to Christ and to his teaching, live responsibly in their daily lives, and gain a proper outlook on the Lord's return.

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

THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS

In his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul addressed a number of specific issues. He wrote about false prophets and about faithful and responsible Christian living. He also corrected their views on the second coming of Christ. But, as we've seen in previous lessons, it's helpful to distinguish Paul's explicit teachings in any of his particular letters from the more basic, underlying theological outlooks that undergirded everything he taught. As in his other letters, Paul's specific instructions to the Thessalonians were explanations and applications of the heart of his theology, his outlooks on the last days in Christ.

You'll recall that Paul's eschatology stemmed from the Old Testament teaching that God was moving all of history toward the culmination of his purposes in the last days. As we noted in earlier lessons, many Jews in the first century referred to this divine plan by dividing history 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 God's enemies and final blessings for God's people. In this Jewish 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, because Paul followed the teachings of Jesus, he 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. From Paul's point of view, Christ had inaugurated the last days in his first advent; the last days would continue throughout church history; and they would reach their fullness when Christ returned in his glorious second advent.

As the early Christians came to discover life in Christ, Jesus' apostles often had to correct misunderstandings of the practical implications of Christian eschatology. As we saw in the lesson "Paul and the Galatians," some Christians failed to realize how much Christ had changed the world in his first coming. We called this imbalanced outlook "under-realized eschatology."

By contrast, the false prophets in Thessalonica had led Christians to another extreme. The Thessalonians developed what we might call "hyper" or "overheated eschatology." Under the influence of false prophets, they had become feverishly consumed with the belief that the consummation of the age to come was just around the corner. Some had even imagined that Christ had already returned. And because of this overheated eschatology, the Thessalonians had moved toward treating responsibilities for faithful living in this age as inconsequential. Paul realized that this "overheated eschatology" had led the Thessalonians into serious problems. So, he wrote to them to give them a more balanced outlook.

For our purposes, we'll highlight just three ways Paul's theological outlooks balanced the Thessalonians' overheated eschatology. First, he explained the doctrine of salvation in a way that countered their overemphasis on the second coming of Christ. Second, Paul demonstrated how Christian morality or ethical behavior is related to the last days in Christ. And third, he explained the historical position of the early church, how near they were to Christ's return. Let's look first at how Paul discussed the doctrine of salvation to help the Thessalonians find balance in their eschatology.

DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Under the influence of false prophets, many Thessalonians had almost completely identified salvation with the blessings that were to come with the return of Christ. Nothing else mattered. To counter this overemphasis on the consummation of the last days, Paul stressed how salvation was already a current reality for the Thessalonians, even as they waited for Christ to return. Listen to 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 where Paul offered a helpful statement of the outlooks he wanted the Thessalonians to reaffirm. Paul wrote:

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

Much could be said about these verses, but we'll take note of three dimensions of the doctrine of salvation presented here. We'll first see how Paul drew attention to salvation in the past, then we'll turn to his concern with future salvation, and finally we'll 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 focused on two areas. First, he spoke of God's choice or "election" of the Thessalonians.

Election. Paul said that God chose the Thessalonian believers long before they came to faith through Paul's preaching of the gospel. God had already 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 foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Ephesians 1:4).

This idea is also present in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, where Paul wrote:

God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Paul's point is clear: the Thessalonians' were saved because God chose them for salvation long before they chose him.

The question of salvation is the central issue in the whole Bible, because the most important themes in the Bible are human sin and God's redemption, which can only be accomplished in Christ... Calvin demonstrated clearly from the Scriptures that salvation was God's work before creation. Man has not received salvation because he kept the covenant, nor is he reborn by being baptized. It is God's election of individuals, Christ's redemption, and the grace of the Holy Spirit that bring God's salvation to us.

— Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation

Now it's important to realize that, for Paul, election was not a disconnected, capricious, impersonal act. As we just read in Ephesians 1:4, God's choice was made "in Christ." And as we've seen in other lessons, to be "in Christ" is to be in union with Jesus. So, as Jesus 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. 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.

Conversion. This idea of election is why Paul also wrote of another aspect of the Thessalonians' past salvation: their conversion to the Christian faith. Notice that in 2 Thessalonians 2:14 Paul said:

To this [God] called you through our gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

God had called the Thessalonians to salvation through the gospel that Paul preached to them. Here Paul referred to the time in the recent past 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 in a similar way about past salvation as something that took place both in the eternal choice of God and when the Thessalonians first believed. He said:

We know... that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in 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 Thessalonians' lives, Paul reaffirmed the gospel he had already preached to them. And he called on them to treasure the fact that they had already experienced certain aspects of salvation.

Future Salvation

A second way Paul drew attention to the doctrine of 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:

Wait for [God's] Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

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

Obtain 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 their 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 in the new creation. Paul was not afraid to admit that, in the future, we'll 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.

We often wonder what life will be like in the future when we are glorified, when we are, so to speak, in the new heavens and new earth. And that's the first thing I'd want to say. I think we ought not to conceive of our eternal life with God as just floating on clouds, so to speak. But we'll have new, resurrected bodies, bodies that are not touched by sin and disease and death. We will be immortal, we will never die, and we'll live on a new earth. Now, details elude us. What will that involve? We don't know all the details, but we know that we'll have some responsibility. We will reign with Christ.

— Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner

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 when he said this:

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

On the one hand, Paul pointed out that salvation was coming to the Thessalonians “through sanctification by the Spirit.” As we’ve seen in other lessons, a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit among God’s people occurred when Christ ascended on high. And Paul taught that this outpouring of the Spirit was a blessing of the age to come that was a current reality in the lives of the Thessalonian believers. In fact, in Ephesians 1:14, he called the Holy Spirit the down payment, or deposit, guaranteeing 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 continuation of Christ’s kingdom 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 in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 by mentioning that we are saved through “belief in the truth.” Paul spoke of the responsibility of all believers to maintain their commitments to God and the Christian faith. And he encouraged 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 on Christ’s second coming that they’ve failed to realize the privileges and responsibilities that result from other dimensions of salvation. Although we never want to lose sight of the wonder 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’s theological outlooks countered the Thessalonians’ overheated eschatology not only by emphasizing the doctrine of salvation, but also by stressing Christian morality, or ethical living. To see how Paul’s teaching on morality reflected his eschatology, we’ll look at two topics: the process of salvation, and the ethical implications of a Christian life. 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:

To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

Paul wrote that the Thessalonians were sanctified and believed the truth in order that they “may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He expressed a similar idea in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 when he prayed:

May [the Lord] strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thessalonians 3:13, NIV)

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.

In terms of the tensions that Christians feel in the overlap between this age and the age to come, I think what best sums up those tensions and how we deal with them, or how we, sort of, in our mind handle that tension, is understanding the three tenses of salvation. Past tense: I have been saved from the penalty of sin; that's justification. Present tense: I am being saved from the power of sin; that's sanctification. Future: I shall be saved from the presence of sin... And as I hold those three — past, present, and future — as I hold them together, and as I see what they mean, I think it enables me to live wisely. I'm so looking forward to being free of sin. I'm so grateful my sin has been paid for, and the penalty has been dealt with. Now, Lord, help me in the present to battle sin. I'm not going to always be victorious. It's ongoing repentance, but at the same time, hopefully, there will be change. I'll be growing more like Christ and looking forward to the future.

— Rev. Rico Tice

Having looked at how Paul's emphasis on morality is reflected in his teaching on the process of salvation, we should consider the ethical implications associated with living a Christian life.

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 by the power of the Holy Spirit 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 bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

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

You are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:5-9).

We see Paul's basic threefold view of salvation again in this passage. In the past, the Thessalonians had become "children of light, children of the 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 keep awake and be 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 on it. God has "not destined us for wrath," but has appointed us to "obtain salvation." He has also appointed our present faithfulness as the means of obtaining our future salvation.

In light of this, Paul included many practical, ethical instructions in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. For example, as we've already seen in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5:22, he exhorted them to 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.

In addition to Paul's theological outlooks on the doctrine of salvation and Christian morality, he offered a third way to correct the Thessalonians' overheated eschatology. Paul described their historical position relative to the events preceding Christ's return.

HISTORICAL POSITION

You'll 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 Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ... that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction ... For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing 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. But in general terms, we may say with confidence that Paul taught the Thessalonians that their overheated eschatology was misguided because certain events had to take place before Christ returned in glory.

In regard to the Thessalonians' historical position, at least four things had to happen before Christ returned: one, the mystery of lawlessness had to be working and restrained; two, a rebellion or apostasy had to occur; three, the restrainer had to be removed; and four, the man of lawlessness had to be revealed. Now before we begin, we should make something clear. Interpreters have understood these four elements in many different ways, and we won't be able to settle every matter to everyone's satisfaction here. So, at this point we'll simply present some widely held views that seem most convincing to us, starting with the "mystery of lawlessness."

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 didn't 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 satanic or 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:

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers ... authorities ... cosmic powers ... spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).

Paul didn't deny that demonic powers have earthly counterparts, such as wicked human governments and individuals who've 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 4:3-9, he taught that Christ's crucifixion had "disarmed" the demons that held power over many believers before they came to faith. And he taught 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 satanic, 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

Following his discussion of the mystery of lawlessness being restrained, 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, this rebellion had not yet taken place, and 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 on the great day of God the Almighty." In Revelation 19:19 it is "war against him who was sitting on the horse." In Revelation 20:8, 9, it's the "battle" against "the camp of the saints 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.

Restraint Removed

Beyond this, Paul indicated that the rebellion or apostasy could never take place

until the “restrainer,” or restraint, was removed and 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 time.” According to verse 9, his “coming” will be accompanied by “power ... signs 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 “antichrist” in 1 John 2:18.

Now, although scholars disagree regarding the precise meaning of each of the elements we’ve mentioned, we at least can be sure of Paul’s larger point. He made it very clear that a number of things had to happen before the second coming of Christ, which meant that Christ’s return was further away than the Thessalonians thought. And he did this, primarily, to draw attention to the significance of their present lives. In a similar way, Christians must not become so overly enthusiastic about Christ’s imminent return that we are tempted to neglect our present service to God. We need to remember how important it is that we engage in our Christian responsibilities now, before the return of Christ.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we’ve seen how Paul responded to problems that arose in the church of Thessalonica. We’ve explored the background of his relationship with the Thessalonians. And we’ve seen the structure and content of his letters to the Thessalonians. Finally, we’ve seen how Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians reflected his central theological outlooks — his teachings about the last days in Christ — by calling on the Thessalonian Christians to cool down their overheated eschatology and to give proper attention to life in the here and now.

As we’ve reflected on Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, we’ve seen how his

eschatology addressed very practical matters for Christians in the first century and how they can guide us today. Much like the Thessalonians, many Christians today are misled into focusing so much on Christ's return that they ignore the importance of living by the Spirit in the present. But Christ has not called us to treat our current responsibilities in his kingdom as insignificant. Rather, he has appointed our time in this life as a time for us to remain faithful to him, to grow in sanctification, and to be his witnesses in the world. In this way, 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 to grow in holiness while we await our Lord's return and the fullness of the age to come.

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GLOSSARY

already and not yet – View of the end times known as "inaugurated eschatology" which asserts that the coming age of eternal salvation is "already" here in some ways, but "not yet" here in its fullness

Antichrist – A person or entity that will have great evil influence in the last generation before Christ returns; sometimes associated with the "man of lawlessness"

apostasy – Rebellion against God after a profession of faith; total rejection of one's faith, religion or principles

apostle – Special New Testament office held by someone who had been taught by Jesus, had seen the risen Lord, and had been chosen for the office by the Lord himself; from a Greek word meaning "one who is sent"

Asia Minor – A geographical area that is now part of western Turkey where Paul did the majority of his missionary work

Barnabas – Friend of the apostle Paul and cousin of John Mark (author of the second gospel) who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey

Bereans – People from the city of Berea who were praised in the book of Acts for their devotion to studying the Scriptures

Cabirus – Name of a local Greek god in first-century Thessalonica who was believed to have been murdered and would return to the world periodically; celebrations of his "return" involved sexual immorality

consummation – Third and final stage of inaugurated eschatology when Christ will return and fulfill God's ultimate purpose for all of history

continuation – Second or middle stage of inaugurated eschatology; the period of the kingdom of God after Christ's first advent but before the final victory

Corinth – Prosperous trade center in south-central Greece that had a reputation for sexual promiscuity; city where Paul planted a church on his second missionary journey and lived for 18 months

Day of the Lord – Technical expression (Hebrew: "*yom Yahweh*") referring to the ultimate defeat and judgment of God's enemies and to the great battle that will take place when God's people are restored to the land

doctrine – A synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic

Epicureanism – Philosophy taught by Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) that considered emotional calm and comfort its primary goals with intellectual pleasures being superior to sensual pleasures

eschatology – The study or doctrine of the last days

Galatia – Roman province in Asia Minor where Paul planted a number of churches on his first missionary journey

Gentile – Non-Jewish person

glorification – The final stage of our salvation, when we receive a perfect eternal body and fully become what we were meant to be, having complete victory over sin and death

inauguration – First stage in inaugurated eschatology; refers to Christ's first coming and the ministries of his apostles and prophets

John – Son of Zebedee and brother of James; one of the twelve Apostles; author of the Gospel of John; 1, 2, 3 John; and the book of Revelation; sometimes called "the disciple Jesus loved"

justification – Initial declaration of righteousness when a believer is acquitted of the guilt of sin and is credited with the righteousness of Christ

latter days – Expression used by Old Testament prophets to describe the period after the exile and by New Testament writers to describe the New Testament period; also "the last days" or the final culmination of history

Macedonia – Name of an ancient Roman province located in and to the north of present-day Greece; region where Paul was told in a vision to go and share the gospel during his second missionary journey

man of lawlessness – A person or entity who is satanically empowered to perform miracles and who eventually proclaims himself to be God; thought to be either a specific political figure or a type of political figure repeated in every age

Marcus Aurelius – Roman emperor from A.D. 161-180 known for his philosophical interests and considered a symbol of the Roman Empire's Golden Age; thought by some to have been a persecutor of the church

Mark – Also known as John Mark; author of the Gospel of Mark and cousin of Barnabas; accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey

Messiah – Hebrew word meaning "anointed one"; the great King from David's royal line who would bring about the transition from this age to the age to come; translated "Christos" in Greek

Nero – Roman emperor from A.D. 54-68 who persecuted Christians; blamed the Christians for a fire in Rome in A.D. 64; executed Paul (according to tradition)

overheated eschatology – Misguided belief that the consummation of the age to come was imminent, or even that Christ had already returned, leading to the view that life in this age was largely unimportant

Philippi – Important city in the Roman province of Macedonia, located on the main road that connected Rome to the eastern provinces; city where Paul planted a church during his second missionary journey

salvation – Deliverance from the tyranny of evil and from God's judgment against sin through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

sanctification – The act of making people and things holy

Silas – Also called Silvanus; one of the leaders in the church at Jerusalem and Paul's companion on his second missionary journey; mentioned, along with Timothy, as coauthor of Paul letters to the Thessalonians

Stoicism – Hellenistic philosophy of personal virtue and well-being based on logic and living in accordance with nature

synagogue – Place where Jews assembled for worship and instruction

Syrian Antioch – Capital of the Roman province of Syria located in what is now modern-day Turkey; Paul's starting point for his missionary journeys; city where Jesus' followers were first called Christians

the age to come – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the future age of righteousness, love, joy and peace that would follow the exile; time when all of God's purposes for history would be fulfilled

Thessalonica – Prominent Roman city and cultural center in northern Greece located along a major trade route; city where Paul planted a church on his second missionary journey and where unbelieving Jews started a riot in opposition to Paul's message

this age – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the present age of sin, suffering and death

Timothy – Paul's young protégé and companion on his second missionary journey who brought Paul news from the church in Thessalonica; mentioned, along with Silas, as coauthor of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians

under-realized eschatology – View of the end times that diminished the significance of Christ's first coming and underestimated how much Christ had already brought the kingdom of God to earth