

SLOW PAUL: THINKING THROUGH 1 and 2 THESSALONIANS

I THESSALONIANS

1Thessalonians was written within twenty years of Jesus' death and resurrection and is one of the earliest Pauline letters. Paul co-authored it with Timothy and Silvanus (Silas) from Corinth in AD 50, a few months after their visit to Thessalonica and Berea. Thessalonica was, and still is, a busy seaport, and was the capital city of Macedonia (Northern Greece).

This letter should be read together with Luke's narrative in Acts 17:1-15, though some ingenuity may be needed to dovetail the two accounts. Both documents make clear that the churches they founded there experienced considerable persecution from Jewish opponents of Paul's preaching. After Paul left for Athens, it would seem that Timothy and Silas stayed on at Berea, which was safer than Thessalonica; however, Paul's escorts returned with instructions that his two friends were to join him at Athens as soon as possible (Acts 17:15). This they probably did, though Acts omits to say so; however, there was such uncertainty about the state of things in Macedonia that Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica, and Silas to Philippi, while Paul went on to Corinth (Acts 18:1). When they were eventually reunited at Corinth (Acts 18:5), they wrote the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians, followed shortly by 2 Thessalonians after news was received about further difficulties in the Macedonian churches.

Those with some knowledge of NT Greek may wish to have the original text by them as they read each section. Helpful commentaries include Morris (2nd ed 1985), Stott (1991), Mayhue (1999), Wright (*Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* 2002). A particular debt is owed to Beale and Carson *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (2007).

1:1-3 ¹ Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. ² We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³ We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Vivid memories

[1:1] Greetings to the church at Thessalonica! You are children of the One True God, your heavenly Father who made you and sustains you, and you are founded on the rock of Jesus, God's King and Messiah. May you know the first-hand reality of his unconditional love, the boundless resources of his Spirit's power, and the utter relief of being able to turn to him as your Friend in every situation.

Here's a letter from us at last! It's written in response to the safe arrival of Timothy and Silas back here in Corinth, and it comes from all three of us, Paul, Silas and Timothy.

[1:2-3] We have such vivid memories of you all. It seems like only yesterday that you were risking your lives to keep us safe from those baying mobs in the market-place, and we'll never forget that night you smuggled Silas and me (Paul) away from the city and then helped the Berean believers find me a boat going to Athens, while some of you even made the full journey with me to make sure I arrived there safely. We can't thank God enough for you, and every day when we gather for prayer we make special mention of you, naming you and asking God to continue his work among you. The extraordinary thing is that after only a few days you became such strong believers, showing in practice how Christ really had changed your lives; you formed strong bonds of fellowship among you, and demonstrated your love in all kinds of practical ways, putting yourselves out for each other and sacrificially looking out for each other's needs. What kept you going in those turbulent early days was your newfound hope in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ, and your expectation that any minute now he is going to establish his

kingdom upon earth and begin his Messianic reign of world peace and sanity. That's why we are besieging the throne of grace on your behalf, asking that this faith and hope and love of yours won't peter out under the pressure of an unbelieving and unsympathetic society. Don't give up now!

1:4-6 ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

A powerful work

[1:4] We have come to know you as highly valued brothers and sisters – but how can we be so sure of the genuineness of your profession of faith? Well, for one thing it didn't start with you at all; it started way back before time began, when the God who is love set his heart on winning you for himself. You may think it's completely by chance that you heard and responded to the gospel when you did; but you have no idea of the precise planning that went into the whole operation. [1:5] There were we standing up in the synagogue or market-place or wherever, telling you about Jesus and racking our brains to find scriptures that would explain who he really was– you could have dismissed it (as many around you did) as irrelevant nonsense, or you might have nodded wisely and gone along with these strange ideas at the time, only to reject them a few days later. But no, it was obvious to us even as we spoke that God was doing a powerful work among you; the message wasn't just our words in your ears, it was God's word in your hearts, as his agent the Holy Spirit coursed in and out among you, waking you up, convicting you of your need, convincing you of the truth as it is in Jesus.

Reckless boldness

Then again, as some of you said at the time and I hope would still affirm, what also contributed to your conversion was the fact that we were prepared to stand up and endure a hail of abuse and even bodily assaults, simply because we wanted you to have the chance of salvation. [1:6] You decided that just as nothing put us off speaking to you, so nothing would put you off putting into practice what we said; so I suppose our reckless boldness infected you, as well as the story of what the Lord Jesus had to go through at the hands of the authorities, soldiers, crowds and everything else. The result was that you stood firm in the face of ribald insults, threats to your life and property and even physical manhandling, all because the gospel made sense to you and your hearts were singing as the Holy Spirit opened his deep wells of gladness within you.

1:7-10 ⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Inspiration and model

[1:7] Well, the upshot of this courageous stand of yours has been that every church I've come into contact with, over the whole of Northern and Southern Greece, has adopted you as their inspiration and model! 'We can't possibly renege on the core truths of the gospel,' they say, 'because those Thessalonians are having everything thrown at them yet they won't budge an inch.' [1:8] In fact, you've been acting as a great broadcasting station up there at the top end of the Aegean Sea, so that not only have people heard the story of Jesus down the length of the Greek mainland, but we continually get visitors to Corinth from one end of the Mediterranean to the other, saying 'You don't need to tell us the

basics all over again, faith in the goodness and love of God and what Jesus went through for us, because it's common knowledge where we come from thanks to those believers up in Thessalonica.'

Top person around

[1:9] Then they proceed to give us a blow-by-blow account of our original mission to you (yes, it's still hot news all over the Roman Empire!), and it's significant that rather than describing the usual miracles of healing or release from demonic forces that take place, they major on the way your attitudes and lifestyles have completely changed. 'These guys used to go in for all kinds of superstitious stuff, magic and Eastern cults and animal worship and gods of this, that and the other – but look at them now! All they can talk about is how they've come to know the One and Only Real God for themselves, because he's Jesus and they've given their lives to him unreservedly, to follow his way of holiness and serve him in his kingdom. [1:10] Yes, and they're banging on about some great event that's going to happen any time now, when this same Jesus is going to come back in person as King of the world and there's going to be a tremendous Day of Reckoning. And when you ask them how they know all this, rather than go into philosophical speculation or sophistic arguments, they home straight in on the empty tomb and Jesus appearing after his death to hundreds of witnesses. They really believe that because Jesus has come back from the dead simply through the power of God, this means he's the top person around and all of us are going to have to face his verdict on our lives. Which isn't going to be exactly flattering, in fact it's going to be devastating. Then they tell you you've got a choice: you can either go on exactly as you are doing, and face the consequences; or you can put your trust in Jesus, who took the consequences for you on the cross. They don't mince their words, these guys: it's perish or be saved, and your response to Jesus makes all the difference.' Just what we told you – and you're passing it on! This is the Lord's doing, and we're witnessing it at first hand, and we're unbelievably grateful.

2:1-4 ¹ You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. ² We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. ³ For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴ On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts.

Complete strangers

[2:1] Let's go back to those first days we spent with you, which are still fresh in our memory, as we're sure they are in yours. You who are now my very dear brothers and sisters in Christ were complete strangers to us, as we were to you. The visit could have been a complete fiasco. [2:2] Stories had gone ahead of us about the way Silas and I had been beaten up and jailed at Philippi, when we might have expected better treatment as respectable Roman citizens (I needn't remind you of the details of that), so we couldn't be sure what reception awaited us when we limped into Thessalonica. In fact we were feeling extremely nervous, so that the confidence and freedom we experienced when we proclaimed the glad news about Jesus came direct from God and had nothing to do with us. Of course we didn't have things all our own way; as soon as we starting producing evidence from the Scriptures pointing to Jesus as the Christ, there were mutterings among the trained Jewish scholars, which developed into outright opposition as they saw several of their number being convinced, as well as all the non-Jews and the well-connected and influential women among you. An attempted mob lynching followed; but as I say you know all about this, though I would add that we were feeling far from fully recovered from our injuries and even moderate exertion was quite painful.

Human verdicts

[2:3] The charges we had to answer, due to the malicious rumours that were swirling around, went more or less as follows. 'These men may sound confident and upbeat, but in fact they are completely deluded. How could a crucified Galilean carpenter possibly be the fulfilment of all God's prophecies to Israel? How could a condemned criminal cast out by God and human society be the anticipated Messiah, greater than even the Roman Emperor himself? This is blasphemous and treasonable nonsense. We know things about this Jesus fellow. Why, he was followed around the place by a band of disreputable and immoral women, who were so infatuated with him that he even let them kiss his feet; and now, surprise surprise, these so-called Christ-people are attracting great numbers of female groupies and doubtless grooming them for illicit favours. Beware of these men: they may be skilled debaters who can twist you round their little finger with their sophistic arguments, but don't believe a word of what they say. Saul, the ravaging wolf in sheep's clothing – he's after your souls!'

[2:4] Sorry, but we are simply not interested in the human verdicts of people who in any case have their own twisted agendas. The only verdict we are concerned about is that of Almighty God himself; if anybody is going to assess us, it is the Judge of all the earth who has already thoroughly inspected our credentials and passed us (yes, even me the Lord's former persecutor) as fit to be entrusted with the precious gospel of salvation. Every time we get up to speak in synagogue, lecture-hall or market-place, or discourse with a little group in someone's house, far from striving to make ourselves acceptable to those whose opinions matter in this world's eyes, our single aim is to be acceptable to the God who can detect even the slightest sign of deviousness or self-interest in our innermost thoughts.

2:5-8 ⁵ You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. ⁶ We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. ⁷ Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, ⁸ so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

Toughness and tenderness

[2:5] Can any of you remember a single occasion when we pulled our punches on order to cosy up to you? No, we told you straight to your faces how it was between you sinners and a holy God. Or (another accusation we've had to deal with) when we insisted that the Lordship of Christ extended to your bank balance and worldly assets, was this secretly designed to fill our own pockets? Let God himself be the Judge of our motives, as I've said already. [2:6] I'm trying to deal with the baseless insinuations that Timothy tells me are still current in your neck of the woods. Another one I find particularly wounding is that we are only interested in being in the limelight as dynamic speakers and debaters in order to attract publicity, and that we insist on people calling us 'apostles' in order to satisfy our inflated egos. Yes, we've had to insist on our genuineness as apostles of Christ to counter others' false claims, but we've never used that title as a big stick to batter you or anybody else into submission, let alone to extract financial support (I'll come on to that in a moment).

[2:7-8] Remember how the Lord Jesus used to insist that status-hunting of any kind was completely out of the question, and that he wanted his kingdom to be full of childlike people who didn't assert their own importance and accepted that they still had a lot to learn? Well, that's the attitude we took up among you. To change the metaphor slightly, we saw ourselves as household nannies or babysitters, looking after you in your newborn faith, changing your nappies or mopping up your messes, not because we were being paid to do it but because we were responsible to God for your spiritual welfare and nourishment. Not to mince words, we loved you to bits – and when you love someone in Christian terms, you don't just hand them the word of salvation and let them get on with it; you devote yourself

heart and soul to their nurturing, even to the extent of happily sacrificing your own concerns and convenience in order to be at their service whatever their need.

2:9-12 ⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. ¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. ¹¹ For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Feather-bedding ourselves?

[2:9] Now this matter of the financial contributions we're supposed to have extorted from you: you must realise it's complete nonsense. Dear friends, you can't have forgotten the manual jobs we signed up for in order to raise a bit of cash – so far from feather-bedding ourselves on your generosity (some of you were exceedingly generous, but we never took cynical advantage of it) we worked ourselves to the bone, if only to stay totally independent. In a typical 24 hours, I Paul would get up at dawn, do a morning's tent-making, snatch some breakfast, hold a lunchtime meeting, go back to work in the afternoon heat, do some home-visiting, hold a major evangelistic rally in the early evening, then eat my supper while standing in a labour queue for some moonlit building project in the neighbourhood. Three or four hours' sleep, and the whole process would start over again. On the Lord's Day our meetings would often continue for much of the night (I admit I used to go on a bit!). The other members of the team had the same kind of punishing schedule.

Transparent lives

[2:10] Then we're accused of being unspiritual, of bending the rules or even of associating with dodgy people to further our own ends! Well, God knows the truth of what we got up to, and for that matter so do you. Our lives were transparent to you as we ministered to your fellowship of believers, men and women alike, and you would have picked up any whiff of double-dealing or attempted exploitation on our part. [2:11] We were all one big family, and I can't express my feelings for you any more strongly than by saying that I loved you all as my own children, all the more so as I haven't any children of my own. Yes, I had fathered many of you through the preaching of the gospel, and since Timothy and Silas are spiritual children of mine too, some of you whom they helped to bring to birth are my grandchildren!

[2:12] Don't you remember the talks we had as I mentored you, the way I challenged you to be all out for Christ, the encouragement I gave to those of you who were bruised reeds or guttering candles, even appealing to my own record as anti-Christian turned Jesus-follower to nudge you towards full commitment? What did we constantly tell you? 'Being a disciple of Jesus isn't just a matter of assenting to a package of ideas propounded by some persuasive speaker– it's going to affect your going out and your coming in, your daily life as you walk around the streets of Thessalonica or Berea or wherever. You've heard the living God speaking to you personally and unmistakably, well and good; but is he saying that now you're saved by believing in his Son, there's nothing more to do except to float into the kingdom of heaven on a magic carpet? Jesus didn't give his life for you so that you could go on living under the reign of sin and governed by your own fleshly passions and preferences. You've had a royal invitation direct from the King of kings, to move into his palace as one of his courtiers and to fight in his army. This isn't so that you can have an easy or comfortable life; in fact it's not designed for your self-gratification or personal promotion at all. It's because there's a battle on: God's glory has been usurped by another, and you (like many others) have been enlisted as his soldier and servant, to lay yourself on the line for his ultimate triumph and vindication.' If you've forgotten all about that, we've been wasting our time.

2:13-16 ¹³ And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. ¹⁴ For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: you suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews ¹⁵ who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone ¹⁶ in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

The redesigning word

[2:13] Well, of course you haven't forgotten what we told you, and that's a matter for our profound gratitude to God every time we pray for you. You could have treated our teaching like that of any other visiting lecturer or philosophy professor, accepting some points but rejecting others, just selecting the ideas that went along with your current beliefs and lifestyle. But no, when you heard the call to belong to Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, you recognised that it wasn't of human origin – it came straight to you from the mouth of the One True God. What's more, this Divine word hasn't stayed on the surface of your minds, it's burrowed deep into the soil of your hearts, and it's working away there energetically day by day, redesigning your attitudes and reinforcing your faith.

Long history of persecution

[2:14] Dear fellow-believers, you are not on your own in this struggle. The churches in Jesus' home country are having a hard time too. In fact they had it tough right from the start, and I'm ashamed to say that I played a leading part in that persecution. But it's still going on, thanks to those of my Jewish brethren who won't accept Jesus as Messiah. It's hard enough when your faith is assailed by external opposition; but it's doubly disconcerting when your own fellow-countrymen start lobbing missiles at you, and undermining your faith from the inside. [2:15] I'm not talking about the Jews in general; I'm pinpointing a particular type of person, like the group of men who were there in Jerusalem egging on the crowds to demand Jesus' crucifixion. They inherit a view that has a long ancestry in the Scriptures and which resulted in the deaths of numerous faithful prophets: that if someone gets up and starts threatening the religious status-quo (which basically means the stranglehold the Temple hierarchy has over the whole system) they've got to be taken out by fair means or foul, usually in alliance with the political heavyweights of the day.

So you're the latest in the long line of God's faithful and persecuted people: first Elijah and Jeremiah and many others, then the Lord Jesus himself, then Stephen who prayed for me in his last moments, then the first apostles (James being a recent example), and now us as Christ's missionaries and you as his latest trophies. How can these men think they're doing God's will? Well, I mustn't go over the top here because I too was convinced that God was smiling on me as I cut swathes through his infant church. But once you get obsessed with butchering people in the name of your religion, you couldn't care less even if everyone else thinks you're beyond the pale. [2:16] All we're trying to do is to tell the non-Jewish world about God's wonderful plan of salvation, and these Jewish brethren, who should have been carrying exactly the same mission themselves, do everything they can to put obstacles in our path! I often tremble for my ancestral people, because they think they're heaping up righteous merit in the sight of God when they are really topping up the dreadful stockpile of sins for which they are going to be judged at the final Day. Even now there are warning signs of the Lord's displeasure; but these are only straws in the wind compared to the perfect storm brewing up for them.

2:17-20 ¹⁷ But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. ¹⁸ For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan blocked our way. ¹⁹ For what is our hope, our joy, or the

crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

Winning through

[2:17] But I digress. Or perhaps not. These discouragements we're facing – such as being wrenched away from you last year like infants torn from their mother's breast – are evidence of a sustained campaign of hostility from a far more dangerous source. We can handle these disappointments, because they're only temporary, and even if we can't see you face to face, we can pray for you and anticipate the return visit we're going to make to you. [2:18] In fact we have been trying our hardest to see you again – at least I Paul have been, because the other two have actually succeeded in doing so – but I've been frustrated at every turn, and I put it down to the machinations of the great Enemy himself. Don't underestimate the one we call Satan: his settled intention is to take an axe to the patient construction work of the kingdom, and chop it into tiny pieces. He likes nothing better than isolating Christians from one another and choking off the refreshing air of fellowship from the people of faith.

[2:19-20] In fact he is frankly jealous. He knows God's plan is to share his eternal home with billions of his human creatures, and he sees people like me and my tiny team gathering souls like yourselves, people who are priceless trophies of grace and who will surround us in a great throng when Jesus makes his royal reappearance. The glittering prizes we shall receive on that wonderful Day will be even better than Olympic crowns: they'll consist in saints like you who have won through to the end of the race, and in whose triumph we shall have played some small part. The pride we take in you now, and the delight we feel when we think of you, are nothing compared to the sheer exultation and relief we shall experience when we all come home together.

3:1-5 ¹So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ²We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. ⁴In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. ⁵For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.

Concerned

[3:1] Yes, we've got to hang in there and maintain solidarity; but waiting around isn't easy, as I found after I had been hustled away by sea from all those goings-on in Berea. You will remember that Timothy and Silas rejoined me at Athens for a short while, but we became so concerned about your situation that I decided Timothy should return to you while Silas would go and see how the Philippians were getting on – leaving me alone once more. [3:2] Why didn't I come myself? Well, obviously I would like to have done, but the Lord had other ideas. The work here in Achaea was opening up; meanwhile Timothy was equally keen to get back to be with you, and we had to accept that for the time being I was too much of a marked man in your area.

I regard Timothy as fully my equivalent, not only because he is a fellow-Christian, but because he has been my completely selfless partner in the work of spreading the gospel. He simply doesn't think about his own safety, because his overriding concern is for you to be able to stand on your own feet as mature believers. Young as he is, he's already taken a lot of flak in the short time since he became a Christian, so he knows what others are going through. [3:3] His message to you has been a simple one: never, never surrender! If you're under such pressure from enemies or friends or family that the best thing you feel you can do is to roll over and give up, just remember that the Lord warned us this would happen. He said if you set your course as a disciple of his, you'll be sailing into a stiff headwind most of the time; he

himself met constant opposition which eventually succeeded in (temporarily) removing him from the scene, so don't be surprised if some people try to do the same to you. [3:4] I'm sure you remember that this was a constant theme of our preaching during our mission to you: as followers of Christ we are not going to have an easy time. In addition to the normal traumas of human existence, to which we are certainly not immune, there is the extra business of belonging to a kingdom that is not of this world. And as you will all too vividly recall, events confirmed this forecast, and the weather turned really nasty for us and for you.

[3:5] The safest course would have been for all three of us to sit tight in Southern Greece and hope against hope that you would survive the storm. But as the days grew into weeks and no message arrived, it got to the point where I couldn't stand it any longer. I'm too familiar with the wrecking tactics of the Great Snake to be complacent about the future of any young church. He will use a combination of seduction and bullying, of external opposition and internal dissension, to undo all the patient and thorough work of the gospel. You will forgive me, therefore, for sending our friend Timothy back into your midst, not as some kind of spy or apostolic dogsbody, but simply to ascertain whether your fragile faith had been ripped out of the ground or whether it was still miraculously growing, and if so, to do what he could to nurture it and encourage you to hold firm.

3:6-10 ⁶ But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. ⁷ Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸ For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Dancing with joy

[3:6] So you can imagine I breathed a huge sigh of relief last week when Timothy walked in through the door of my lodgings at Corinth and announced with a broad grin that everything was OK. 'These Thessalonians don't just believe the gospel, they live it! They're a warm, friendly fellowship, supporting each other in all kinds of practical ways. And they haven't forgotten you, Paul, far from it: they keep quoting things you said, and they are desperately yearning to see you again as soon as possible.' Well, of course that's exactly how we feel as well. [3:7] My dear, dear friends, my family in Christ, you are such a tonic to me! All those dreadful things that happened, all those violent attacks, the thoroughly nasty going over we got from You Know Who (and it's still going on down here) – why, they fade into insignificance beside the reality and vibrancy of your trust in Jesus Christ and your sacrificial obedience to him.

[3:8] I genuinely feel I've been given a new lease of life, now I know you lot haven't been knocked over or blown off course, but are putting your roots deep down in the Lord and drawing daily nourishment from him. [3:9] Of course, we've got plenty to thank God for here, because (just as with you) not only Jews but Gentiles are beginning to turn to Christ in large numbers; but now we've heard your news, our gratitude knows no bounds, and we're literally dancing with joy in the presence of God, singing all the praise songs we can think of, [3:10] and holding all-night prayer meetings just asking over and over for us to be able to come back and see your familiar faces again. Not only that, but we've so much more to tell you about the riches God has in Christ for you. We're constantly digging out new insights from his word, now that we know that the Scriptures are full of things about Jesus. You may think you know what you believe. and that's good – but how well do you know the One you believe in? As the Lord says to Joshua when he's defeated dozens of kings and taken all their cities and thinks he can now put his feet

up, 'There are still huge swathes of territory you haven't even begun to make your own'. Let's go on together!

3:11-13 ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he 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.

Prayers

[3:11] That's why we've never stopped planning to come back and see you, despite the complications. We could easily feel completely frustrated; but actually we deal direct with God in this matter. He is our Father and he knows what's best for the kingdom and for us. Moreover, Jesus is our absolute Lord and Director and we take all our orders from him. He's told us that as long as we keep in close touch with him, he can level all the mountains and straighten the twisting roads that at present make coming your way so difficult. [3:12] Prayer works wonders! So we're content to tell him what we want and leave it to him. What else do we pray for? Well, obviously, that you all stay united. I know quite a few churches that have shattered into quarrelling fragments, all because they never grew love and affection for each other (which I won't pretend is easy sometimes). There's no standing still here: either you keep the vessel topped up to overflowing, and God's got to do this through his Spirit, or you let it drain down until nothing is left. This applies as much to your relationship with the outside world as it does to your own fellowship. It certainly applies to us down here, I can tell you – why, every day that goes by naturally causes our memories of you to grow fuzzier, so we carefully make lists of your names and go over all we know about you and so on, simply to keep our minds well-stocked and our hearts warm where you are concerned.

[3:13] Hearts aren't just places where you get nice feelings about people, they are decision centres where you make stern choices and stick to them no matter what. We are designed as human beings to follow God's will through thick and thin; but the Adam nature has a long history of collapsing into what's most comfortable or advantageous to us in the short term. This means we have another prayer for you, and that's for you to live lives of transparent integrity and Christlikeness. This doesn't happen in a day. It's a continual process of coming into the light and being cleansed and setting our moral compass to align with the Father's pleasure. We love hiding away in the shadows, when our best interests lie in coming out into the open before God and abandoning all our excuses and self-righteousness and double-mindedness. Once again I would remind you urgently of the climactic moment towards which all time is hurtling: the return of the Lord Jesus in person to take up his Kingship over his redeemed world. My point is this (and I'll go into a bit more detail about this in a moment): the King will be surrounded with a mighty army, consisting of all who have steadfastly believed in him, whether they have died or are still alive – are you going to be one of them, or will you have melted away under pressure before that wonderful denouement? I'm praying every single one of you will be there, unashamed and joyful.

4:1-8 ¹ As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. ³ It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. ⁷ For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸ Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

God's standards of purity

[4:1-2] So to conclude this letter, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I'm going to tackle a few tough questions you may still need answering. Of course, before we had to leave you we gave you masses of stuff about the Christian life, about the kind of behaviour that would honour Christ and bring delight to God the Father's heart; and we have no reason to think that you are not faithfully carrying out our instructions. All the same, we feel passionate about this, so please forgive us if we bang on about certain aspects where slack discipline or erratic teaching may make you drift off the high road of holiness – after, it's not we who are telling you all this, it's the Lord Jesus. So please bear with what we have consistently been saying, as though they were battle orders for the day from the Commander-in-Chief himself.

[4:3] The first question goes something like this: 'You've told us that God is a holy God and so he expects us to live radically different lives from the general mass of mankind. Does that mean that having sex with someone to whom you're not married is totally off the agenda? And does that include occasional visits to prostitutes? Because if you're a man in modern-day Thessalonica, that kind of harmless indulgence is fairly standard practice.' You asked a straight question, so here's a straight answer. You've got to learn to say 'No', and I'll tell you why. [4:4] The body each of you has been given (and I'm talking to women as well as men) is a precious and priceless gift from God. Your Greek philosophy tutors may argue that since the body is merely a receptacle for the soul, and is destined to perish, you can treat it as a temporary asset which is at your disposal to do what you like with. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Your bodies are a permanent part of you, both in their physical state here on earth and in their transformed heavenly state that is to come. They are, or rather you are, creations of God that are being changed from one kind of glory into an even greater glory. Your attitude, then, should be to treat the body you're given (which may vary in attractiveness and ability, but it's been entrusted to you for the keeping) with the utmost respect and honour and, yes, with the highest possible standards of self-discipline with regard to food, sex, cleanliness and everything else.

[4:5] The alternative is to adopt the standards of your pagan friends and neighbours, and indeed of all inhabitants of this earth who are alienated from the life of God because they've rejected his true knowledge in preference for a gross distortion. This means, effectively, that desire is king and they are its willing or reluctant bondslaves. They take orders from their lower natures because that's the line of least resistance. Do you really want to be like them? Hasn't coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ given you something much, much better, a freedom to use your bodies for his glory?

Only one aim in mind

[4:6] This applies, of course, to married life, and here I'm speaking mainly to you men. It would be bad enough if you crossed the boundaries of honest business practice and started defrauding your associate; how much worse when that associate is a fellow-Christian and the boundaries are sexual ones, ending up with you seducing his wife? Even if you got away with it (meaning he never found out) you would have to reckon with the Lord, who knows everything – the pleasure you might have got in the short term would be nothing compared to the pain of coming under his severe displeasure and judgment. We didn't mince our words on this subject when we were with you; in fact we gave you plenty of examples from Scripture of people who set aside their high calling for a dish of tasty stew, or who allowed themselves to be fatally entrapped by an experienced woman of the world.

[4:7] No, you need to settle right from the start the terms on which that call from God is based. Far from permitting you to compromise your moral standards, or to adapt the rules of the game to whatever you think you can get away with, he has only one aim in mind for you, and that is to be like Christ, in all his goodness and faithfulness and love and purity. [4:8] So if you decide on a whim to throw up all that

highminded stuff and consign the life of holiness to the garbage bin, just please realise that it's not the teaching of the church you're rubbishing, nor the monastic ideals of grumpy old bachelors like Paul – it's the clear and consistent precepts of a God who doesn't change his mind, and who means exactly what he says about sin and repentance and eternal life with him.

His own Spirit

'Impossible!' do I hear you saying? Of course it's impossible, if you try to go it alone. No merely human resolve or willpower, no amount of religious observance and self-denial, could achieve the kind of godly character he requires. The good news is that he has already given us (and that includes the weakest believer among you) all the spiritual equipment and provision we need for this adventure – and that is his very own Spirit and presence. Didn't the Lord Jesus promise that even though he was going away temporarily, he would send an Ally to be with us 168 hours a week? Is it so hard to accept this offer? Do you doubt his ability to live his own life in the midst of yours? And even if you let him down, do you think he'll walk away with the job half finished?

A final thought on this topic. I've talked about 'your' bodies, but of course they aren't really yours at all. Just as a father might buy a house for his son or daughter to live in, so God, through the Lord Jesus dying for us, has bought our bodies for his Holy Spirit to live in. That means we belong to him, flesh, blood and all. If his purpose is to make us holy, by recreating us as living and walking temples, then we had better start today where we are. This may mean re-evaluating our relationships and banishing any idol that we have set up for ourselves. Allow one little compromise, and we show we don't really mean business with the living God.

4:9-12 ⁹ Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. ¹⁰ And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, ¹¹ and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: you should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹² so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Friendliness

[4:9] I was going to slip in a reminder about how absolutely vital it is to maintain loving and harmonious relations with your fellow-believers; but Timothy has reassured me that there's no need to worry on that score, because he detected no sign of rivalry or tension between or within your house-churches (it's rather different here, I can tell you) – he says it's almost as if the Lord himself is moving among you and teaching you personally, which of course he is! [4:10] Apparently your reputation for friendliness has spread all over Northern Greece: as soon as a brother or sister from another city turns up on business, you give them a royal welcome, offer unstinting hospitality and send them on their way rejoicing. Well, all I say is, don't give up; and if you find yourselves growing numerically, make sure the new believers get infected with the same spirit, because it's all too easy to grow complacent about your success, and gradually the joy goes out of your fellowship as your living relationship with Jesus at the centre is replaced by routine or even formalism.

Seek to serve

[4:11-12] The other danger of a growing church is that some individuals may go around spongeing off other Christians and not doing their fair share of the work, claiming that Jesus is coming back any moment so why waste time earning money which in any case is earthly treasure and not the heavenly riches we should all be accumulating? Well, of course they're right in one way, but wrong in another. If you want to be ambitious for the kingdom of heaven, you should seek to serve others, not to have others serving you. This means hunkering down and getting on with earning your own way in life, even if it

might mean doing basic manual work. Otherwise you end up by being a burden to others and being dependent on them for your daily bread. Is that what you want? It will also gain the church a reputation for harbouring layabouts and parasites, which can't be a good thing. All of you should be involved in fund-raising efforts by all kinds of inventive means, so that far from the Lord's people being known for begging off other people, they can be a beacon of care for those less well off than themselves or who are going through a rough patch in their personal circumstances. Be givers, not takers!

4:13-18 ¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Bereavement

[4:13] However, these spongers are right about one thing, which is that Jesus is coming back again soon. This brings me to the vital topic of what happens to those who have died in the faith of Christ. You are a warm and loving fellowship and so it's natural that you should have a deep sense of loss when one of your number 'falls asleep', as we are taught to say. Various theories are going the rounds about this, so forgive me if I try to be as precise as I am allowed to be about what we can expect to take place. The fundamental point is that however much you feel bereaved in this world of time and place, you don't need to go through the agonised hopelessness of people whose worldview leaves them no possibility of ever meeting their loved ones again.

[4:14] The gospel gives us incredible comfort here. The Lord Jesus had to pass through the gates of death himself for our sakes, so that we wouldn't have to face God's judgment for our sins. In a real sense, then, he took us with him through death – and then out the other side into his own risen life. He's already done our dying for us; that's why we can simply refer to death as 'falling asleep with Christ,' and then 'waking up' on the glorious morning of the final resurrection. God has planned that those who put their faith in Christ should never be separated from him, which means that when he returns in his glory, he will bring his 'departed' saints with him.

Resurrection sequence

[4:15] In fact, however long their mortal remains have lain in the ground, they have in reality always been in Christ's close presence and his safe keeping. Jesus taught this to his disciples, so I'm just passing it on. This means that those of us who are still living their earthly lives when Christ comes back again needn't worry about having to wait before seeing their loved ones, because we'll all be together in his tangible company. [4:16] The sequence of events is going to be something like this: the new creation, just like the old one, is going to come into being with a single word of command. There's going to be a massive chorus of angelic praise, led by the foremost of the angels (eat your heart out, Satan!), and God's trumpet-call will ring out so that the entire universe will be in no doubt that its release into true freedom has at last arrived. The centrepiece of this unbelievable denouement will be the personal appearance of our Saviour Jesus, once again making the descent from heaven to earth, but this time as manifest Lord and King for every tongue to confess.

This will be the cue for a general resurrection of all who have ever believed in Christ. They will come out of their tombs or wherever their mortal remains have been laid to rest (some known only to God), [4:17]

and will be joined, as I've said, by those of us who have been permitted to survive to witness this joyful climax of history – however long time goes on, it's going to come to an end one day, but we haven't been told the date so every generation is potentially the last one on earth.

So the long anticipated reunion takes place. Imagine swirling clouds of glory (the Lord often talked about this, notably in his witness before Pilate) and the amazed look on everyone's face as they are swept literally off their feet to meet their descending Master. Yes, we will all meet again, I assure you; but the really important thing is that this is only the first day of the rest of eternity, the endless life we are going to enjoy in the Lord's own presence, never again to be separated by time or chance or death or sin or any kind of sorrow.

5:1-3 ¹Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ²for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, 'Peace and safety', destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

Terminal condition

[5:1-2] This business about not knowing the exact day and hour of this mother and father of all spectaculars is puzzling some of you, I don't doubt. 'Why can't we have a bit more precision about the sequence of events, and isn't this to play into the hands of sceptics who point out that the world is continuing very much as usual so why should they worry?' Well, I'm sure you're well enough grounded in the Lord's own teaching that has been handed down to you to know that little or no warning is going to be given to the general population. They've been told often enough that this material world isn't going to last for ever, but they deliberately turn a blind eye to it. Does the burglar announce his arrival with a flourish of trumpets, or does he slip in at the dead of night when no one is expecting him? Yes, there's a paradox here: when the actual Day comes and the Lord is revealed in all his glory, it will be unmistakable; but up to that moment, most people will have no inkling of its imminent arrival. For us believers, it's a big challenge to keep awake and expectant; but for the world it's business as usual until the thunderclap comes.

[5:3] You will hear all sorts of wild theories about a series of omens and natural disasters leading to the end of the world, but remember that the Lord told us not to get alarmed by this kind of thing; in fact, the news is probably going to be quite good in the week leading up to his return, warring nations reconciled, the economy booming, crime figures down – and suddenly it all happens. It's like a mother-to-be expecting to see out her full term of pregnancy, so she goes shopping as normal, and she's coming back with the family groceries when the dreaded labour pains strike, and before she knows it she's in the crisis period of a premature birth. One moment you're planning your summer holiday, and the next the volcano erupts and every avenue of escape is blocked. The fact is, the world is suffering from a terminal condition known as unbelief, and the fatal heart attack could come at any moment.

5:4-11 ⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Awake or sleepwalking?

[5:4] The great good news is, however, that you, my beloved family in Christ, are not going to be snoring away when the burglar breaks into the house. [5:5] This isn't because you're just going to break lucky and will happen to be awake at that moment; it's because you have the light and love of Christ shining upon you, you've been reborn as children of that first Easter morning when the Sun of righteousness arose with healing in his wings. You simply don't belong any more to the world of shady practices and dark deeds of lust or cruelty, or the complacent ignorance of the millionaire counting his worldly possessions. [5:6] Here's the challenge, then: are we going to live our lives like the vast majority of mankind, sleepwalking towards a wide-open window, or have we got our eyes fully open and our senses alert for the first sign of something wrong? [5:7] I'm not saying Christians should be habitual insomniacs, or should stay awake all night in case a meteorite hits the house – I'm just making the obvious point that belief and unbelief are as different as day and night. Those who opt for a God who is dead and a Jesus who won't return can snore their lives away (though it may not be a sleep untroubled by nightmares); those who want to dull life's pain with opiates of one kind or another can pull the blankets over their heads and pretend there's no life to come; [5:8] but we who have come out into the daylight of resurrection morning can't go back to the drunken stupor of our previous existence. We've signed up to fight for Christ's kingdom designs: so every morning we need to equip ourselves for the epic battle, checking whether we've put on our body armour (by which I mean a faith which really believes and a love which really works), and whether we've got our helmet firmly secured (meaning an expectation of the Lord's final triumph, however long it's going to take).

[5:9-10] Yes, we're going to be in that victory parade, not because we've been good soldiers all our lives (I'm all too aware that I once fought on the wrong side) but because God in his mercy chose to overlook our lamentable failures and call us into the service of his Son. If I can look forward to the absolute certainty of enjoying eternal life with him, it's got nothing to do with how much I may have achieved and everything to do with what he has achieved. I'm talking of course about that dreadful day when we thought our beloved Master had finally come under the curse of man and God, when he was really being crushed for the iniquities we had all committed. He was making the ultimate exchange: his own precious and sinless life in human flesh and blood, in return for a church which whether it is living for him upon earth or dying in the faith of Christ, would make it through to Resurrection Day and a new life entirely.

[5:11] Meanwhile we've each got a job to do. We all need encouraging to stick to the task in hand, and to support each other in the conflict. Or, to change the picture, we're all working on the same building project, seeing the great kingdom mansion rising to its full glory and perfection. This requires unity of mind and purpose and effort. The great thing is that I know I needn't be telling you all this, because you're doing it already. Well, just don't give up halfway through the job! There's too much at stake.

5:12-15 ¹² Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

Mutual harmony

[5:12-13] 'But,' you might say, 'if we're all fellow-builders, male and female, young and old, and if we're working under the Great Architect himself – do we really need people who call themselves overseers and swan around just giving orders and not doing a hand's turn themselves?' Well, I think good leadership is absolutely vital and deserves our highest respect. The church needs people who are going

to accept responsibility and put in hours and weeks of work that the rest of us probably don't adequately recognise, if we see it at all. Among these responsibilities is up-front direction of a strategic kind, usually consisting in a team of elders who keep their eyes on various aspects of the church's policy and programme. I would also include those who minister God's word to us, either pastorally or prophetically, and whom the Lord uses to put his finger on things that need dealing with individually or collectively.

There's all the difference in the world between a loving fellowship where God's people are only too happy to acknowledge and show appreciation for the work others are doing for the Lord, and the kind of back-biting and nit-picking and downright disloyalty that should never exist in a Christian context, but is unfortunately all too common. Mutual harmony is an absolute priority; and it starts, of course, from each individual finding the peace of forgiveness and acceptance by the Lord, and then a sense of gratitude pervades the whole fellowship.

Waterwheel of grace

[5:14] How does this kind of respect and appreciation translate into practice? What it doesn't mean is a kind of easy-going tolerance of indiscipline. I'm not implying that everyone should rigidly toe the party line, or that there isn't a need for people who are prepared to think outside the box – but we should deal firmly with those who take every opportunity to rock the boat, or who think they can get away with personal irregularities that set a bad example to others.

We will also have to take a strong line with the pessimists who believe that every new mission initiative or programme to help the poor is going to fail disastrously. We need risk-takers and pioneers rather than scaremongers and fainthearts. Having said this, there will obviously be others who are going through a real period of doubt or discouragement, and whom we should be pastoring gently and practically. The key to it all is a tolerance of human nature which recognises the need for personalities to express themselves in a variety of ways, while drawing the line at unacceptable or definitely unscriptural behaviour.

[5:15] For instance, personal revenge is completely out of the question. When someone's acted towards you in a deliberately offensive manner, you must restrain the natural tendency to return like for like. Two wrongs don't make a right. Just consider the example Jesus set when the soldiers were nailing him to the cross, or when the theology experts were taunting him for being a loser. Instead, be absolutely determined, whatever the occasion, to bring blessing to others, whether they are your fellow-Christians or indeed members of society at large. Then you will create a water-wheel of grace rather than a vicious circle of bitterness.

5:16-18 ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

[5:16-18] If you ask me to select three characteristics of a church that is consistently gladdening the Father heart of God and is centred foursquare upon the Lord Jesus Christ, I would name the following: joy, prayer and thanksgiving.

Joy

It's easy enough to say that we should never cease to be rejoicing in the Lord's presence in our lives, but what happens if everything's going wrong and we can't see where our next meal is coming from? The wellspring of true happiness isn't our circumstances or our sense of achievement, it's the friendship of

Jesus day by day. It's knowing he will never give up on us, or walk out on us with the job of salvation only half done.

Prayer

It may seem impossible to keep our minds consciously beamed towards God when there's so much going on around us, but why restrict this wonderful privilege to a couple of times a day or even just once a week on the Lord's day? We can keep up a running conversation with the Lord, and even if we don't know quite what to ask for (it's not wrong to ask for things, you know!) we can trust the Spirit to translate our inarticulate longings into language that is understood at the throne of grace.

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving: it's natural to feel full of gratitude when God is obviously being good to us and things are swinging along nicely, but has he stopped being good when life has caved in on us? And if you ask how we can possibly thank God for things that are unambiguously evil, well, what did Job mean when he said that the Lord gives and takes away and blessed be his name? The bottom line is that nothing can happen to us which is not ultimately sanctioned by him; and if we find ourselves shouting at him for allowing such dreadful experiences to happen to us or to others, like the Psalmist we can still thank him for being there to shout at.

5:19-22 ¹⁹ *Do not quench the Spirit.* ²⁰ *Do not treat prophecies with contempt* ²¹ *but test them all; hold on to what is good,* ²² *reject every kind of evil.*

Dependence on the Spirit

[5:19] The secret of true joy is to let the Holy Spirit have his way with us. Ever since Pentecost, when the fire of God came down and rested individually on each believer, the church has depended on the Spirit of God for its guidance and energy. The moment we throw a thick, heavy blanket over the fire, consisting of a stifling legalism, or a ritualistic formalism, or an over-insistence upon the way things have always been done, we effectively frustrate the role of God's key agent in the church. [5:20-22] Prophecy is a striking demonstration of the Lord's continuing instruction for his people. Just as the prophets of old found themselves speaking with a wisdom and a passion that came not from themselves but from the living God, so the same Lord equips certain people, who may not have much to commend themselves by way of natural gifts of intellect or personality, to bring his word to his people. This may happen in a prepared and structured discourse, or it may happen in a spontaneous outflow. The important thing is receptivity with perception. If we are always sniping at God's mouthpieces, or pouring scorn on 'over-enthusiastic' utterances, we may miss what the Lord himself is trying to get across to us. If on the other hand we assume that everything said in a prophetic mode is straight from heaven, and we don't subject it to the test of Scripture, we risk being at the mercy of well-meaning but misleading 'guidance'. A genuine prophecy will always have something good and wholesome that we can agree upon and put into practice; but sadly, the devil can twist even spiritual gifts to his own purposes, and tempt God's people into an unwise or even immoral course of action, just because they thought a word came from the Spirit and they didn't spot its infernal origin.

5:23-24 ²³ *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ²⁴ *The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*

Wonderful Day

[5:23] 'Well, Paul, thanks for all the highly important instructions you've given us about the church, but if we can just bring it down to the personal level for a moment, and referring back to what you said about God's aim being to make us holy— I've got to be brutally honest and admit that in my case I don't

think he's within a hundred miles of achieving that goal.' Yes, and that's why we're praying for you down here! Just get one thing straight, though: God is on your side in this battle. He's not your enemy any more. Peace has broken out, thanks to the cross of Christ, where the guilt and power of sin have been decisively and fundamentally defeated. The rest is mopping-up operations. What is there to worry about?

But I know it's hard. I pointed out quite clearly that we couldn't pull ourselves up to his required level of holiness by our own moral willpower. It needs God himself to take on the job and complete it to his own satisfaction. It's a task way beyond our ability to tackle. Yes, we've got to cooperate with him, but eliminating every scrap of selfishness and lust and pride from our earthly natures – why, only the Spirit of Christ can achieve that kind of magical transformation. And he has committed himself to doing precisely that.

Imagine once again that wonderful Day when the Lord Jesus is going to reappear in person, tangibly and gloriously back here as King. He is going to gather us together, as I've already described, and he's going to present us to the Father as his own flawless and perfect inheritance. It's not some wispy part of you that's going to survive death, it's the whole of you, your physical, mental, emotional, imaginative, moral and spiritual being, renewed and reshaped into the image of Christ who redeemed you.

[5:24] What is there to worry about? Oh, I know you're being tested in all kinds of ways. We all are. We're in the arena with gladiators and lions and some of us are getting quite badly mauled. But we've heard his call and the trumpet is still sounding through the mist and the pain of our daily existence. Because he is there for us. He's never, ever going to abandon us or leave the job half finished. We may let him down, even quite badly, but he will never let us down. We are his gift from the Father and his gift to the Father. He has given his word.

5:25-28 ²⁵ *Brothers and sisters, pray for us.* ²⁶ *Greet all God's people with a holy kiss.* ²⁷ *I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.* ²⁸ *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

Signing off

[5:25] That's what prayer is for: to get God's heavenly will done on this extraordinary planet of ours. So just as we are praying for you, dear friends in Thessalonica, please, please in return pray for us. The opportunities are great; the opposition is relentless. [5:26] When you greet each other in your fellowship, give everyone an extra hug from me – but don't overdo it! [5:27] And could you make absolutely sure, as a matter of your solemn obligation to the Lord, that you don't just keep this letter to yourselves in the capital, but make careful copies and distribute it round Berea and Philippi and anywhere else you can think of – as long as they are going to treat it as God's word and not just the opinions of a renegade apostle.

[5:28] I'm going to sign off now. Our Lord Jesus is among you, as he promised he would be. May you know the abundance of his grace and love. You are so precious to him, as you are to us here.

(Signed) Paul, Silas, Timothy.

2 THESSALONIANS

See the Introduction to 1 Thessalonians for the date and background situation of this letter. It needs to be borne in mind that not only is Paul vividly conscious at all times of his own conversion from persecutor to apostle, but his mind is saturated with the Greek version of the Scriptures (the Septuagint or LXX), and he may use words or allusions from that version to support his argument. This would resonate with the more educated of his readers; as we know from Acts 17:10ff, not only Jews but Greeks at Berea were receptive to his message and 'examined the Scriptures (i.e. what we know as the Old Testament) every day to see if what Paul said was true.' The version of the Scriptures with which they would have been most familiar is the LXX. While I have deliberately refrained from using modern commentaries in this project, I have found one particular work indispensable, and that is G K Beale and D A Carson *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (Baker Academic and Apollos 2007), which is a mine of information on the OT passages upon which Paul seems to have drawn and by which his choice of language is likely to have been influenced.

1:1-2 ¹ *Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ² Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Another letter?

[1:1] To God's church at Thessalonica, secure in the protection of our heavenly Father and owing total allegiance to our wonderful Lord Jesus Christ. Greetings from Paul, Silas and Timothy! Another letter, so soon after the one we just sent you? [1:2] Never mind – the important thing is that you and we stand under the abundant waterfall of ever-forgiving love that flows from the throne of our Father Creator God and our Redeeming Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He freely gives us all the spiritual resources we need to keep going in the Christian life. So don't worry about anything whatsoever, because he's got it all under control.

1:3-4 ³ *We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.*

Reasons to be thankful

[1:3] As you probably realise, the three of us here at Corinth regularly meet to pray for you, the keynote of our prayers being great gratitude to God for what he has been doing among you. This isn't just a matter of duty, as if we have to spend five minutes every day giving thanks for the Thessalonians then that's it. No, we are members of the same family, so it's absolutely right and natural for us to be thinking of you and rejoicing in the closeness of our bonds to you, even though we're several days' journey away from you in what we call real time. There are good, solid reasons for us to be thankful to God: for one thing, the tiny seed of faith which we planted over a year ago has grown into a sturdy little shrub, much more quickly than we had any cause to expect; and what's more, it isn't just a theoretical faith divorced from daily life, but it shows itself actively in the way you are prepared to put yourselves out for one another. Timothy has told us how every single one of you does their utmost to dream up ever-fresh ways of serving one another and meeting the needs not only of fellow-believers but also of the local community.

[1:4] In fact, we're so proud of you that we can't resist telling the other churches we have been visiting what splendid role models you are. Not that we're happy about the difficulties you've been going through, of course: you've been verbally and physically assaulted, your homes have been trashed, your services have been disrupted, and many of you have been put under severe pressure to abandon your

faith in Jesus as the Messiah. But there you are still standing defiant and upright! This is all evidence of how God is constantly replenishing your spiritual reserves, and that's why we can't help jumping for joy in his presence as we remember you and continually send up urgent prayers on your behalf.

1:5-10 ⁵ *All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.* ⁶ *God is just: he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you* ⁷ *and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.* ⁸ *He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.* ⁹ *They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might* ¹⁰ *on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

Divine logic

[1:5] There's an inescapable Divine logic at work here. God is going to hold every single person responsible for their behaviour and for the motives behind it. At the same time, he is preparing his people for their entry into his eternal kingdom, and that may mean that on the way their faith is severely tested. If it is through my opposition and persecution that you are tempted to give up your faith, then I will bear a heavy responsibility. When people challenge your right to call yourselves members of the kingdom of God, you can take them to passages like the last chapter of Isaiah where the true friends of God are said to be, not those who offer meaningless sacrifices, but those who submit humbly to his word even when they incur the scorn and hatred of their own brethren for doing so. In other words, the very sufferings you are experiencing, whether you are Jews or Gentiles, are scriptural proof that you are approved by God. [1:6] I'm not saying that if you suffer for a particular cause, it automatically proves that you are doing God's will; I'm simply reminding you that it's not the verdict of human beings that counts ultimately, it's the verdict of God. He has stated clearly that the whole earth is going to be judged by the sword of his word, and this judgment is going to fall upon anyone who causes grief to his true people.

[1:7-8] You may be going through agony at the present moment (as we are) for professing faith in Jesus Christ as Lord; but one day all illusions will be dispelled. I talked a moment ago about the Divine logic, and what is more logical than that the Lord is going to return as King to claim the earth as his kingdom? Whenever it happens, this is going to be a stupendous event. Isaiah talks about chariots of fire and flame, the invisible but solidly real forces that surround the people of God, bringing relief to them and judgment to their adversaries. This is all going to become visible on that final Day of denouement, when Jesus 'comes back' (meaning we shall actually see the situation as it has been all the time) escorted by armies of angels, to deal out justice to those who are blind to the true character of God and who refuse to accept the good news of his forgiveness and grace expressed in our Messiah, the Lord Jesus.

[1:9] What is going to happen to these people? Nothing that they haven't deserved. Again there is a remorseless logic at work here. They have consistently refused to look God in the face or to allow his light to flood into their lives – so then, any chance of light and life will be finally taken from them. Instead of that wonderful moment when they could look directly into the face of the God they had always known and loved, and feel his strong arms around them welcoming them home, they will find that they are banished far from his sight, to experience an eternity of bitter regret that they ever put their lives at the service of evil.

[1:10] But for you who have steadfastly trusted in Jesus as Christ, the great coronation Day of his return is going to be a totally glorious occasion. We get a glimpse of this in the Psalms where the Divine One is

surrounded by his holy ones and the centre of everyone's undivided worship – only this time it's not just the angels but billions of ordinary believers, sinners amazed to find themselves saints, giving full-throated praise to the Man who gave himself to the uttermost for them. And we'll be there too, rejoicing that when we stood up that day in the synagogue or market-place at Thessalonica, and did our best to tell you about Jesus, our words made sense to you and the seeds of your faith were sown. What a day that was – and what a Day it's going to be!

1:11-12 ¹¹ *With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.* ¹² *We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Prayer for spiritual strength

[1:11] Meanwhile there's work to be done. On our side, we can do nothing except carry on praying for you (and writing letters!). 'Lord, these folk up in Northern Greece have heard your call and have leapt at the chance to become your people: please don't leave them to struggle on by themselves, please send them spiritual strength. There they are facing all kinds of temptations and longing to be more like Christ in all his goodness and purity, and trying to witness to him by carrying out programmes of practical assistance to those in need – won't you make their desires and their efforts fruitful by the power of your Spirit?' [1:12] I've been talking about the final Day of Glory, and quite rightly too because it's coming, oh yes it's coming soon – but meanwhile there's glory to be kindled on earth too, because while these people want to put you to shame, your single aim is to establish the honour of Christ, because he's there among you, and you're being kept secure in his love, to express however haltingly your gratitude to the God of all generosity who comes to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

2:1-2 ¹ *Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters,* ² *not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us – whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter – asserting that the day of the Lord has already come.*

Complete nonsense

[2:1-2] The trouble is, as soon as I start talking about the climactic appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ in his royal glory, or explaining how he is going to hold that megachurch meeting to end all church meetings, when all true believers will escort him to begin his eternal reign in the new heavens and the new earth – up jumps someone and shouts 'He's here!' Then they describe some powerful vision or angelic visitation they've had, or a prophetic word of knowledge, or even claim (so I gather) that a courier has arrived with a communication from Paul and his apostolic team, proving that Christ has already arrived back on earth and we've all got to drop what we're doing and go and meet him.

I need hardly say that it is all complete nonsense. We are still looking forward to his coming and, as I'll emphasise in a moment, we've got plenty of work to be getting on with. All the same, such unbalanced notions can have a disturbing effect on a Christian fellowship, so that people start holding urgent meetings and disrupting everyone's daily work and processing through the streets with placards saying we've got to arm ourselves for the final battle with the hosts of evil – you know the kind of thing. Our Lord himself specifically warned his disciples that rumours would fly around about signs betokening his arrival, with miracles to prove it's really Jesus back again. Well, don't believe a word of it. When it happens, everyone on earth will know about it, don't you worry!

*2:3-5*³ Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.⁴ He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.⁵ Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?

Anti-God conspiracy

[2:3] All sorts of wild ideas are flying around as regards the Lord's arrival back on earth, and I don't want you to be taken in by any of them. Let's just examine the evidence of Scripture and the Lord's teaching, and establish what's going to happen to lead up to his return. One, there's going to be a massive anti-revival. You'll hear people telling you that revival's coming and the whole planet is going to get converted, but the opposite is going to be the case. Faith in Christ is going to become a rare commodity. The church is going to go through severe testing and shrink to vanishing-point, because everyone will have joined the other side. You may think being a Christian is unpopular today, but wait for the days to come!

Two, there will be a leader of this anti-God conspiracy. In one sense there has always been a spirit of insurgency rife amongst humanity, but this one is going to be different. He is going to come out into the open as The Ultimate Rebel King. His characteristic will be a complete disregard for divine and human laws and norms. Don't worry, he's got it coming to him, as you might expect; but of that more anon.

[2:4] The point is that what Daniel says about 'the king of the north' is going to culminate in a specific individual who will be the incarnation of evil. His declared aim will be the total eradication of belief in the One True God, not because of any rational argument but simply because he says so. Worship of any kind will be banned. Religious systems throughout the world will be replaced by an ethical and philosophical programme with himself at the centre. He won't express it like this, of course, but the unspoken premise will be that what he says goes, and anyone who disagrees with him will be treated as a rank heretic. Religious buildings will be torn down and replaced by shrines to the New Thought, meaning, of course, absolute obedience to the Great Tyrant.

[2:5] I know that there have been and doubtless will be historical figures who seem to match this description; but this particular personage will dwarf them comprehensively. I seem to remember lecturing to you about it all when I was last in Thessalonica – perhaps some of you made notes you could refer back to now. I'd be surprised if you'd forgotten everything I said, but everyone's so busy nowadays.

*2:6-8*⁶ And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time.⁷ For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming.

Entry of the Rebel King

[2:6] Well, if you remember, there is a Restraining Principle in operation at the moment, meaning that normal law-abiding life can go on and evil is punished and things may get very bad but they won't get out of hand. This is standard apocalyptic teaching and entirely consistent with Scripture. However, alongside the usual line that the true Messiah is coming (in the Christian view, coming back again), you have to realise that The Rebel King is also due to make his grand entry. [2:7] As I said, there will always be a certain level of anti-God behaviour around in the world, which may fluctuate at different times. This doesn't mean that God isn't firmly in charge, of course; but there is going to come a time when God himself will suspend his moral governance of the earth in order for evil to come out of the shadows and

show itself for what it really is. [2:8] That's when this Mr Big figure is going to emerge and basically command goodness to be abolished. Again, Scripture is entirely consistent about how the true Messiah is going to deal with all this.

Our amazing Master will have a twin strategy, both sides of which involve the church, which is where you and I come in. Just as Jesus himself is the Word of God, so his word in the mouth of his saints, inspired by the Holy Spirit, will be a determining factor in his final victory. However bad the situation gets, never lose confidence in the power of the written, spoken and incarnate Word to win the day. But of course the other factor, the climactic moment of the Lord's return in person, will be the really decisive event. He has never ceased to be present to the eyes of faith, but on this last of all days his reappearance will rally his exhausted and apparently defeated troops and together we shall achieve the final undoing of the Rebel King.

2:9-12 ⁹ *The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, ¹⁰ and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹ For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie ¹² and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.*

The power of deception

[2:9] 'But surely it will be obvious to everyone that this Grand Enforcer figure doesn't stand a chance against God himself?' Don't underestimate the power of deception. Satan has been a liar from day one and he is quite capable of impressing the vast majority of mankind with dazzling displays of miraculous power. Remember the magicians of Egypt who were able to duplicate anything Moses and Aaron could do – until they finally had to admit defeat. [2:10] The fact is, when people don't believe in God and choose to travel on the broad way that leads to destruction, they lose the ability to distinguish right from wrong and truth from falsehood. The last thing they are going to do is to embrace the actual truth that can lead to their salvation.

[2:11] Faith is and always has been the key in the lock. God has designed it so that when you turn the key one way, in the direction of untruth, the door shuts tight against the light entering and it becomes impossible to see straight. Unbelief becomes the flavour of the month and people get swept into falsehood as if by a powerful current. [2:12] Turn the key the other way, in the direction of truth, and the invisible reality of God's world which lies just beyond the door will become as plain as daylight. You alone decide the direction in which you turn the key, and God will hold you responsible at the final judgment. Once you stop believing in the way God has designed things and wants them to work, you show that the only thing you have your heart set on is your own selfish pleasure, no matter how it affects other people. You have been warned!

2:13-15 ¹³ *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*

The first in Europe

[2:13] But of course it's not you I've got in my sights, you incredible family people whom the Lord loves so much. I said at the start of this letter that we can't stop thanking God for all he's been doing among

you, and I mean that. Yet there's another reason for deep gratitude, which is that you are uniquely special. You and the other churches of Macedonia are the very first people in Europe to find salvation through Christ. You are the guarantee of a rich harvest to come! The quality of the first sheaves to be reaped is a predictor of the quality of the whole crop, which is why we offer them to God in thankfulness and praise for his blessings. God has a special interest in these trophies of his grace, and he selects them with extra care.

You may say, 'We're a pretty ordinary bunch – what's so special about us?' I'm just going to mention two things that strike me about your attitude, and the first is your wholehearted consecration to Christ through the indwelling power of the Spirit. You've realised that no amount of rules and regulations and observances of this or that formula are going to fit you for the presence of a holy God; instead you are humbly and totally dependent on the Lord who is among you and who alone can enlighten your minds and give you strength to overcome temptation and live a new life. Secondly, you drink from the fountain-head of truth itself, rather than making a beeline for the rabbi whose name is on everyone's lips or the latest authority on Pentateuchal criticism. I remember so well how quite a few of you were ransacking the Scriptures day after day to make sure for yourselves that what we were preaching was God's word and not human fancy. There is no substitute for personal Bible study and in-depth examination of the latest trend in spiritual teaching.

Everything thrown at you

[2:14] It is amazing how God works. Having determined to build a people for himself in Northern Greece, he needs to get them to hear his insistent call through the welter of other voices. So he finds a job lot of itinerant evangelists operating across the sea in Asia and tells them to stop what they're doing and go and preach in Macedonia. We arrive in your midst and you actually believe what we're saying, well, some of you do at least. Big trouble from those who think we're there to make a nuisance of ourselves. But the Lord sticks to his purpose, which is that these new sons and daughters of his should make it through to the dawn of the new creation, to share in the triumph of the King and stand by his side arrayed in the beauty of holiness.

[2:15] That's why I'm telling you to hang in there and not to give up for any reason whatsoever. You are going to have everything thrown at you and at times the situation is going to seem quite desperate. Just remember what we've been consistently telling you and the other churches, either in our preaching and personal counselling week after week, or in the letters we're sending you as substitutes for our living voices. You are at the end of a long line of faithful teaching that starts in the Jewish Law and continues through the prophets to our Lord Jesus and his apostles, and you in your turn have got to pass it on to your children. Don't break the chain by caving in to those whose so-called traditions have nothing to do with the word of God.

2:16-17 ¹⁶ *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,* ¹⁷ *encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*

Prayer for help

[2:16-17] So I'm going to say a little prayer for you. 'Lord, you know what our friends up there are going through. They are incredibly precious to you, because you've died for them and you want them in glory with you. You've stirred their hearts by revealing the eternal inheritance awaiting them, and the reward they can look forward to once their battle on earth is over. You promised that your grace is going to be more than sufficient for them. Lord Jesus Christ, heavenly Father, go among them now by your Spirit. Please send them fresh encouragement if their faith is fluctuating or their determination to serve you is showing signs of ebbing away. Help them to put down firm roots and to grow into mighty oaks of

righteousness, abundant in good works and ready to share the good news of Christ. May they gladden your heart and bring glory to your name, Amen.'

3:1-3 ¹ *As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you.* ² *And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith.* ³ *But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.*

Batter the doors of heaven

[3:1] What else do I need to say before I seal up this letter and send it off? Well, for one thing we continually need your prayers, so please continue to batter the doors of heaven on our behalf; we're here in Corinth for one thing and one thing only, which is to bring the gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike, but there's always a danger of things grinding to a halt because momentum is being lost for one reason or another. The amazing thing when we arrived in your midst a couple of years ago was that unimpressive as our preaching was, you treasured every word as if it came straight from God. Well, we want that to happen here too. [3:2] The other topic for your prayers is the continual opposition we are getting from completely irrational and twisted characters whose one intention is to silence us once and for all. Even though we are getting a lot of conversions, it's quite clear that some folk are determined not to believe our consistent testimony to Jesus being the Messiah. But our struggle isn't with the foibles of human beings; the battleground is and always has been the region of faith, that unseen realm where the opposition concentrates all its firepower. [3:3] And that's where our Lord is going to win, because his faithfulness is rock-steady. We (and you) may fall flat on our faces; but he picks us up and sets us on our feet again. It may seem at times as though the hosts of evil and unbelief are simply too overwhelming and are closing in for the kill, but the Lord will always turn up in the nick of time and fling the force-shield of his protection around us. I've seen this happen time and again. He will never, ever let us down. It must be very frustrating being the devil.

3:4-5 ⁴ *We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command.* ⁵ *May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.*

The main thing

Please don't think I'm badgering you to do something you're not doing already. Knowing the Lord, and how the Spirit's work is to stir his faithful people up to prayer, I can imagine you are regularly interceding for us and will continue to do so. I just want you to know we're incredibly grateful – it makes a huge difference. [3:4] So here's another little prayer we're offering up for all of you. 'Lord, in all the distractions and busyness and pressures up there in Macedonia, will you enable those dear trusting friends of ours to keep the main thing steadily in view, which is to know that you love them and have always loved them. May they be set free to love you in return. May they appreciate more and more fully what the Lord Jesus went through on the cross for them, and please will you give them that same unshakeable determination never, never to let anything turn them away from following you, whatever the cost. Amen.'

3:6-10 ⁶ *In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every brother who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.* ⁷ *For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you,* ⁸ *nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.* ⁹ *We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order*

*to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.*¹⁰ *For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.'*

Freeloaders

[3:6] The next thing isn't easy, but I've got to say it. You're all Christians, but quite frankly (and in case you think it's just Paul throwing his apostolic weight around, let me tell you that this has come to us from the Lord Jesus Christ himself) there are some in your fellowship who are freeloaded at everyone else's expense. I'm not talking about cases of genuine need whom of course you should be helping as far as you are able; I'm concerned about people whose personal lives are a shambles and who are a direct contradiction of the orderly behaviour we have always emphasised in our teaching. Will you please not fraternise with these brothers and sisters until they sort themselves out and start making a useful contribution.

[3:7-8] I suppose you don't remember that far back, but when we were among you we tried to give you an example which you could imitate when we'd gone away again. Far from swanning around and taking meals off everybody without paying a penny for them, we stood in the labour queue and took any job that was offered, daytime or night-time, no matter how physically demanding or socially demeaning – all so that none of you should feel under any pressure to 'offer' us hospitality or give us regular board and lodging. [3:9] I realise that this is a big issue, because the Lord Jesus said that 'the labourer is worthy of his hire' and missionaries have a perfect right to accept support in the demanding work they do. But I see it like this: if we set a bad example by spongeing off the people we're trying to win for Christ, it will make it easier for others to do the same, whereas if we work for our living, at least we are providing a blueprint for church leaders and members to follow when we're not there. [3:10] So (again I hope you remember this) we coined a slogan which went like this: 'Slackers deserve to starve.' Sounds tough, is tough. The fact remains, if you can do an honest day's work but choose to lie in bed instead, then nobody is under any obligation to throw a crumb of food in your direction. Otherwise we create a culture of dependency and people become Christians just to fill their bellies.

3:11-12¹¹ *We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies.*¹² *Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.*

Loungers and scroungers

[3:11] Well, we hear the problem hasn't gone away. Apparently you have a small minority who consider themselves too spiritual to dirty their hands with earning their own way in life. As a result they turn up at people's homes expecting a free meal or, even worse, claiming that they are doing the Lord's work and therefore have a right to interfere in people's domestic arrangements. [3:12] You can give these loungers and scroungers a short message straight from the Lord Jesus himself: 'Stop bothering your fellow-Christians with your clamorous demands and get on with an honest day's work! Eat food you've earned yourselves off your own tables at home.' I'm really serious about this – it's a complete disgrace and it brings the gospel into disrepute.

3:13-15¹³ *And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.*¹⁴ *Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed.*¹⁵ *Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.*

Spiritual pariahs

[3:13] Practical goodness isn't an option for those who profess to follow Christ. He spent his whole life helping people to better their lives and so should you. Don't be put off by people who call you do-

gooders – you will always meet cynics who will try to rubbish God’s values. Being bad-mouthed by unbelievers is no excuse for throwing in the towel where your discipleship is concerned.

[3:14] It occurs to me that some of the layabouts I was talking about a moment ago will try to show a lofty disdain for our instructions here and elsewhere in this letter. Don’t just shrug your shoulders and tolerate them – treat them as spiritual pariahs. Don’t give them a platform in your meetings; in fact you could do worse than ban them from your fellowship. Certainly don’t sit down to meals with them or offer them any kind of hospitality. That might shock them into re-evaluating their attitude. Perhaps instead of loudly and proudly trumpeting their superior spirituality, they might creep back thoroughly ashamed and beg to be readmitted. [3:15] Actually, I suppose there’s a danger of taking this too far; you could permanently damage your relationship with them. They’re not some kind of poisonous creature that has got to be put down as quickly as possible; they’re still your Christian brother or sister. So rather than adopting an inflexible hostility towards these folk, some of you should take them aside and do some straight talking with them. Tell them you’re not going to stand for it, and spell out the consequences if they persist.

3:16-18 ¹⁶ *Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.* ¹⁷ *I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.* ¹⁸ *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.*

Peace has broken out

[3:16] But when all’s said and done, these are just passing squalls that may trouble the surface but leave the depths undisturbed. Whatever might be upsetting you at the present time, just go back to the reason you’re all there in the first place. You’ve gathered at the foot of the cross where the Lord Jesus has made friends with God on your behalf. The war’s over; peace has broken out. That’s what he told me on the road to Damascus. And now the risen Lord is standing among you and offering you his companionship through all your trials and difficulties. So here’s my (final!) prayer for you: ‘Lord, bring peace to these dear children of yours in Macedonia. You know what they have to go through all day and every day. Just shrink their anxieties to vanishing-point. Calm their storms and bring them safely to land. Be with them in their homes, their places of work, wherever they journey, whoever they meet. Be Lord of their hearts and minds, every single one of them.’

[3:17] It just occurs to me, given these forgeries that have been doing the rounds, that you may think this missive is some kind of scam. Well, rest assured that it isn’t. I’ll sign off using my trade-mark flourish which you can find in my distinctive scrawl at the end of all my letters. [3:18] May you know the great generosity of the Lord’s love for you all. He’s there with you, just as he’s here with us. Everything’s going to be all right.

(Signed) Paul, Silas, Timothy.

CROSS-REFERENCES

It is striking that neither Thessalonian letter contains any explicit quotation from the Old Testament. This must be because the church was predominantly Gentile; however, Paul sees the believing Gentiles as full members of God’s renewed Israel (so Beale and Carson 877), and this is reflected in his frequent use of language and phraseology from the Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint or LXX). *Starred references therefore are possible cases of Pauline allusion to OT background, especially where he has reinterpreted a passage about ‘the Lord’ to refer to Jesus. Other references may suggest OT or NT passages with a thematic similarity.

1 THESSALONIANS

1:1-3 Back here in Corinth Acts 18:5, 1 Th 3:6. Mobs in the market-place Acts 17:5. Away from the city Acts 17:10. Arrived there safely Acts 17:14-15. Faith and hope and love 1 Cor 13:13.

1:4-6 Way back before time began Eph 1:4, 2 Th 2:13 (footnote). Who he really was Acts 17:2-3. Irrelevant nonsense Acts 17:18. Truth as it is in Jesus Eph 4:21.

1:7-10 Release from demonic forces cf Acts 8:7, 14:3, 15:12, 16:18. One and Only Real God *1 Sam 7:3. Top person around Acts 17:31. Unbelievably grateful Ps 118:23-24.

2:1-4 The first days we spent with you Acts 17:1ff. The details of that Acts 16:19ff. Jesus as the Christ Acts 17:3. Number being convinced Acts 17:4. Mob lynching followed Acts 17:5-6. The Roman Emperor himself Acts 17:7. Let them kiss his feet Lk 7:38. So-called Christ-people Acts 11:26. Judge of all the earth Gen 18:25. Group in someone's house Acts 20:20. Innermost thoughts *Jer 11:20, Ps 17:3, Heb 4:12-13.

2:5-8 Batter you into submission cf 2 Cor 12:11-13. Status-hunting of any kind Mk 10:43-44. Full of childlike people Mk 10:13-16. Still had a lot to learn Reading *nēpioi*; some versions read *ēpioi* = 'gentle'. Whatever their need Acts 20:34-35.

2:9-12 A morning's tent-making Acts 18:3. Some home visiting Acts 20:20. Used to go on a bit Acts 20:7-12. Preaching of the gospel 1 Cor 4:15, 1 Pet 1:22-23. Guttering candles Mt 12:20. On a magic carpet 2 Pet 1:10-11. Passions and preferences 2 Cor 5:15.

2:13-16 Persecuted people Heb 11:32. First Elijah Rom 11:2. Stephen who prayed for me Acts 7:60, 22:20. James being a recent example Acts 12:2. God was smiling on me Acts 26:9. Same mission themselves Isa 49:6. My ancestral people Rom 9:2. Merit in the sight of God Rom 10:3. The Lord's displeasure Paul may be alluding to the expulsion of Jews from Rome in AD 49, Suetonius Claudius 25:4, Acts 18:2.

2:17-20 To the end of the race 2 Tim 4:8.

3:1-5 Goings-on in Berea Acts 17:15. Selfless partner Phil 2:22. Since he became a Christian Acts 14:22, 16:1. Others are going through 2 Cor 1:4. Do the same to you Jn 16:1-2. Not of this world Jn 17:14, 2 Tim 3:11-12. Turned really nasty Acts 17:5. Seduction 2 Cor 11:3. Bullying Rev 2:10.

3:6-10 Timothy walked in Acts 18:5. Still going on down here Acts 18:6. Turn to Christ in large numbers Acts 18:8. Huge swathes of territory Josh 13:1. Go on together Heb 6:1.

3:11-13 Level all the mountains Mk 11:22-23. Never grew love and affection 2 Pet 1:7. Through his Spirit Rom 5:5. Coming into the light 1 Jn 1:7. A mighty army *Zech 14:5.

4:1-8 Even greater glory 2 Cor 3:18. Alienated from the life of God Rom 1:24-25, Eph 4:18-19. Dish of tasty stew Heb 12:16. Woman of the world Prov 5:20-23. 168 hours a week Mt 28:20, Jn 14:16-18. Love and purity *Exod 19:5-6. Holy Spirit to live in *Ezek 36:5-7, 1 Cor 6:19-20. Set up for ourselves 2 Cor 6:16.

4:9-12 Which of course he is Jn 13:34-35; 14:26. Or even formalism Rev 2:4. Fair share of the work 2 Th 3:11-12. Coming back any moment 2 Tim 2:18. Have others serving you Mk 10:43-45, 1 Tim 6:18-19. Basic manual work 2 Th 3:8.

4:13-18 Falls asleep Jn 11:11. Never be separated from him Rom 8:38-39. His safe keeping Phil 1:23. To his disciples Jn 12:26. Like the old one Gen 1:3. Angelic praise Job 38:7. Eat your heart out Satan Isa 14:12ff, Ezek 28:14. God's trumpet-call Mt 24:31, 1 Cor 15:52. Release into true freedom Zech 9:11, 13, Rom 8:21. Every tongue to confess Phil 2:11. Come out of their tombs Jn 5:28-29. Told the date Mk 13:32. Witness before Pilate *Dan 7:13, Mk 14:62. Any kind of sorrow Rev 21:4.

5:1-2 Why should they worry 2 Pet 3:4. Handed down to you Lk 1:2. Turn a blind eye to it 2 Pet 3:5ff. Burglar announce his arrival Mt 24:43. Awake and expectant Mt 24:42. Business as usual Mt 24:38. Alarmed by this kind of thing Mk 13:7-8. Crime figures down Mt 24:38-39.

5:4-11 Shining upon you Eph 5:14. Healing in his wings Mal 4:2. Worldly possessions Lk 12:19. No life to come 1 Cor 15:52-54. Service of his Son 1 Tim 1:12ff. We had all committed Isa 53:4-6. Ultimate exchange Acts 20:28.

5:12-15 Individually or collectively Ezek 33:7, Col 1:28. Nailing him to the cross Lk 23:34. For being a loser Mt 27:41-43. Society at large Gal 6:10, 1 Pet 3:9.

5:16-18 Presence in our lives Ps 16:11, Phil 4:4. Next meal is coming from Hab 3:17-18. Only half done Phil 1:6. Throne of grace Rom 8:26-27, Heb 4:16. Blessed be his name Job 1:21. Sanctioned by him Rom 8:28. Being there to shout at Ps 42:11.

5:19-22 On each believer Acts 2:3. Word to his people 1 Cor 12:8. Put into practice 1 Cor 14:3-5.

5:23-24 *To make us holy* 1 Th 4:7. *Pointed out quite clearly* 1 Th 4:8. *Already described* 1 Th 4:17. *Perfect inheritance* Eph 1:18, Col 1:22, Jude 24. *Badly mauled* 1 Pet 1:6, 5:8. *Abandon us* Heb 13:5-6. *Let us down* 2 Tim 2:13. *Gift from the Father* Jn 6:37, 10:29. *Gift to the Father* Jn 17:9, 1 Cor 15:24.
5:25-28 *Opposition is relentless* cf 1 Cor 16:9. *Treat it as God's word* 1 Th 2:13. *Promised he would be* Mt 18:20.

2 THESSALONIANS

1:1-2 *Got it all under control* Phil 4:6-7.

1:3-4 *Splendid role models* 1 Th 1:7-8. *Difficulties you've been going through* 1 Th 2:14.

1:5-10 *Heavy responsibility* Mt 18:7. *Last chapter of Isaiah* Isa 66. *Meaningless sacrifices* Isa 66:3. *Hatred of their own brethren* *Isa 66:5. *Approved by God* Mt 5:11-12. *Sword of his word* *Isa 66:16, Rev 19:15. *Grief to his true people* *Isa 66:6. *Chariots of fire and flame* *Isa 66:15. *Solidly real forces* 2 Ki 6:17. *Service of evil* Mt 7:23, 13:40-42. *In the Psalms* *Ps 68:35, 89:7.

1:11-12 *Honour of Christ* Isa 66:5.

2:1-2 *End all church meetings* Mk 13:26-27. *New heavens and new earth* Isa 65:17, 66:22. *Signs betokening his arrival* Mk 13:7. *Jesus back again* Mk 13:21.

2:3-5 *Rare commodity* Mt 24:12. *Severe testing* Dan 12:7, Rev 13:7. *Anti-God conspiracy* Dan 7:25. *Rife amongst humanity* 1 Jn 2:18. *King of the north* *Dan 11:36-37. *Himself at the centre* Ezek 28:2, Isa 14:13.

2:6-8 *Final victory* *Isa 11:4, Rev 12:11. *Apparently defeated troops* Rev 13:7.

2:9-12 *Liar from day one* Gen 3:1, Jn 8:44. *Magicians of Egypt* Gen 7:11-12. *Leads to destruction* Mt 7:13.

2:13-15 *Consecration to Christ* 2 Cor 8:5. *Presence of a holy God* Isa 57:15. *Ransacking the Scriptures* Acts 17:11. *Stop what they're doing* Acts 16:7-10. *Believe what we're saying* Acts 17:4. *Nuisance of ourselves* Acts 17:6. *Beauty of holiness* Ps 29:2, Col 3:4. *Seem quite desperate* Eph 6:13.

2:16-17 *Oaks of righteousness* Isa 61:3.

3:1-3 *Straight from God* 1 Th 2:13. *Continual opposition* Acts 18:6. *Silence us once and for all* Acts 18:6. *Foibles of human beings* Eph 6:12. *All its fire-power* Eph 6:16. *Faithfulness is rock-steady* Lam 3:23. *Never let us down* Heb 13:5.

3:4-5 *Unshakeable determination* 1 Th 3:13.

3:6-10 *Worthy of his hire* Lk 10:7. *Demanding work they do* 1 Cor 9:3-12.

3:11-12 *Honest day's work* Tit 3:14.

3:13-15 *Better their lives* Acts 10:38. *Rubbish God's values* 1 Pet 3:16-17. *Ban them from your fellowship* 1 Cor 5:13. *Any kind of hospitality* 1 Cor 5:11. *Taking this too far* 2 Cor 2:7.

3:16-18 *Made friends with God* Rom 5:1. *Road to Damascus* Acts 26:18. *Risen Lord standing among you* Jn 20:19. *Lord bring peace* Num 6:26.

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