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1 Thessalonians: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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CONTENTS

00:00:00 - 1 Thessalonians 1: The Example of the Thessalonians

00:08:26 - 1 Thessalonians 2.1-16: Paul's Memories of Ministry Among the Thessalonians

00:21:37 - 1 Thessalonians 2.17—3.13: An Encouraging Report from Timothy

00:28:51 - 1 Thessalonians 4.1-12: Holy Living

00:39:20 - 1 Thessalonians 4.13—5.11: The Coming of the Lord

00:54:15 - 1 Thessalonians 5.12-28: Exhortations and Benediction

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Transcript

1 Thessalonians, commonly regarded as likely Paul's first letter, begins with a typical Pauline greeting. The greeting is a more standard greeting for letters of the period. It declares or introduces the writer or the writers.

It identifies the addressees, on this occasion the Thessalonians, the Christians in the church at Thessalonica. This is followed by greetings, and as most letters follow this with

a wish for the health of the addressees, Paul's epistles typically have a thanksgiving or prayer at this point. Paul includes Silas, Silvanus is an alternative form of the name Silas, and Timothy with him as those sending the letter.

However, in verse 18 of chapter 2, where he writes, I Paul, we have a suggestion that Paul is the one writing the letter in all of their names. While it is sent under all their names then, Paul is the true author. Silas was one of Paul's missionary companions in his second missionary journey, during which they had visited Thessalonica.

Their visit there had been short and abortive, which helps us better to appreciate Paul's joy and wonder in the lasting fruit that it had produced. In Acts chapter 17 verses 1-10 we read of this period. Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews, and Paul went in, as was his custom.

And on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ. And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. And the people in the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the Jewish synagogue. Timothy had joined Paul and Silas back in Lystra at the beginning of Acts chapter 16. In verses 1-5 of that chapter we read, Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra.

A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. Timothy came to function as if a son to Paul, who represented him as a son might

represent his father, and who could act in his name.

Timothy presumably was present with Paul and Silas in Thessalonica, and perhaps he stayed on there for a little while after Paul and Silas escaped. Paul addresses his letter to the church of the Thessalonians. The church was a way of referring to the communal assembly of a body of people.

It is not unlikely that they had various smaller groups within the city, but the whole body of believers in that city are termed a church. They are described as being in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a very unusual reference to a church being in God, something that is associated in the closest way to the church being in Christ.

As Gordon Fee notes, this is probably an indication of the very high Christology, or the strong doctrine of the divinity of Christ, that Paul holds. It is not unlikely that the Shema can be heard behind such a formula. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The term God is related to the Father, the term Lord to Christ. Both Christ and the Father are related to the one God. Where a typical letter of the time would begin with the salutation, Greetings, Paul opens his letter as he often does, Grace to you and peace.

The source of the grace is God and the consequence of this grace is the peace of Christ. The thanksgiving that follows situates the gratitude that Paul expresses within the context of the continual prayers of Paul and his missionary companions. They recall the initial response of the Thessalonians to the gospel message that they brought.

This remembrance is before God. It is probably not merely a subjective bringing of these details to their minds and thankfulness for the memory. It is also a declaration of these things in their prayers to the Lord, constantly calling for his attention to these things, calling for him to complete what he has started in the Thessalonians.

They were distinguished by their work of faith, their labour of love and their steadfastness of hope. Their work of faith was likely the way that they acted out of confidence in the word of Christ, producing the fruit of righteousness in their community. Their labour of love could have been the efforts manifesting their hearts of devotion for Christ and the Father.

And their steadfastness of hope might have been their unwavering assurance of and living in terms of the Lord's promise. The Thessalonians' initial response to the gospel message, the message of the Lordship of Jesus, the Messiah of Nazareth, was a demonstration of their election, of the fact that God had chosen them. The Christian virtues with which they answered the message revealed that they had first been lovingly chosen by God, their eyes being opened to see Christ.

That is why faith, hope and love were the fruit that sprang up. The gospel came to them with a bang, not just as words, but with signs of the Spirit's power accompanying it. The

conviction with which it came to the Thessalonians was also proof of the Spirit's power.

It wasn't just words of Paul the Apostle, the gifted rhetorician. It was an effective communication of the Spirit that broke open hard hearts and produced new life where death had once reigned, resulting in remarkable and manifest transformation. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the way that he and his fellow missionaries were among them, setting an example for the Thessalonians which they had followed.

As the Thessalonians followed the example of Paul and his companions, they themselves became examples to other churches. Indeed, their reputation has spread abroad among the churches. Paul and his companions don't even need to say anything about the Thessalonians to churches elsewhere, because those other churches have already heard and are talking about the news from Thessalonica.

Their response to the good news of Christ's reign in Thessalonica had itself started to function as good news of Christ's reign. The word of the Lord had sounded forth from them. What is this word of the Lord that Paul refers to here? It is the news of what God had done among them, which is also the message of their answering faith, an answering faith that is proof of the Lord's power in and among them.

They have abandoned idols to serve the true and living God. They are waiting for the risen Son from heaven, the one who delivers us from the wrath to come, both the final judgment and the condemnation of the present age awaited in coming judgment upon Jerusalem and other places. A question to consider.

The news of what the Lord had done in the hearts and lives of the Thessalonians itself became a word of the Lord and a gospel message. What are some of the ways in which the sharing of our testimonies of what the Lord has done in our lives and the lives of others can function as an extension of the fundamental message of the gospel? Moving into chapter 2 of 1 Thessalonians, Paul continues his discussion of the way that he and his fellow missionaries acted among the Thessalonians when they were with them. Through elaborating the nature of their ministry among the Thessalonians, Paul can contrast them with the sorts of false teachers that might come along to the Thessalonians afterwards.

There are four successive false statements in which Paul does this. The first begins in verse 1, the second in verse 3, the third in verse 5 and the fourth in verse 9. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the manner of their arrival there. They had been badly treated at Philippi, where they had been mistreated and imprisoned.

However, when they came to the Thessalonians their coming was not in vain. Their message was characterized by great boldness even in the midst of conflict. Paul is here most concerned that the Thessalonians appreciate the way that their behaviour as missionaries served properly to showcase the message that they declared.

Gordon Fee helpfully presents Paul's argument in the form of a series of related not, nor and but statements. Our appeal was not based on error, nor on impure motives, nor on trickery, but as those approved by God we speak, not as people please, but before God. For we did not use flattery, nor wear masks to cover greed, nor seek praise from human beings, but we were innocents like babes among you.

Paul's intent here is by careful description to demonstrate the guileless and self-giving character of their ministry, a ministry faithful to the message that it served, in such a way that Paul can distinguish himself from other teachers and philosophers. Paul describes himself and his fellow missionaries as driven by a strength beyond their own. Despite fierce persecutions, they have courage in God to declare the gospel against great opposition, knowing that its effectiveness depends not upon their own force of personality or rhetorical skill, but upon the power of the God who entrusted them with it.

As Paul describes the situation elsewhere, as the emissary of the gospel message, he is less the bearer of a message than one born along by it, as God leads his marvelling apostolic co-workers in triumphal procession through the world. Paul proceeds to present the unfeigned and pure motives from which they acted in declaring the gospel to the Thessalonians. In his apostolic ministry Paul was not driven by a desire for personal gain or for public praise, but by a weighty responsibility to God, who had committed the gospel message to him.

He declares himself to be a tried and true servant, one whose heart is tested by God, whose ministry is approved, presumably through the many trials and forms of persecution that he endured. Unlike the charlatans, who were characterised by the vices of deceit, impure motives and trickery, Paul and his companions were the genuine article, summoning both the Thessalonians and God as his witnesses, Paul insists that he was unmotivated by a desire for human praise or material gain. His only intent was to acquit himself well as a servant pleasing to the God who sent him.

Consequently, the message of Paul and the missionaries with him to the Thessalonians was not marked by the artful flattery typical of sham teachers, nor perverted by attempts to use his message as a means of personal gain. Indeed, even though he was in a position that would have enabled him to make self-serving demands of them, Paul's actual conduct was in the most startling contrast to such exploitative behaviour. Rather than taking advantage of his power in relationship to the Thessalonians, Paul and his team not only went to considerable lengths to avoid placing any demands upon them, but also gave of themselves in ways that invite the most arresting imagery.

There is a difficult textual issue at this juncture as some Greek manuscripts have a word meaning infants while others have a word meaning gentle. The weight of the arguments on both sides are quite finely balanced. The liveliness and fluidity of Paul's imagery in this context is something that is worth noting.

He moves from comparing himself and his team to nursing mothers in verse 7, to fathers in verse 11, to orphans in verse 17 in their relation to the Thessalonians, all in the span of a few verses. This makes the possibility that he might be referring to themselves as infants more likely than it might have been elsewhere. If this were the meaning, it would powerfully illustrate the guilelessness and the completeness of their self-bestowal to the Thessalonians.

In a striking comparison, Paul likens his missionary team to nursing mothers. The Apostles' surprising use of such a maternal image for their ministry is not unique to this context. In Galatians 4, Paul speaks of himself as a mother struggling to give birth to her children again.

The image is a fitting one. It expresses the Thessalonians' dependence upon Paul and his fellow workers, and the loving self-donation of the missionary team to the infant believers. Paul is not merely conveying a message, but is like a mother begetting, nursing and cherishing the children formed by that message, who have the most intimate of bonds with him.

The image also represents Paul's longing for and intimate involvement in the Thessalonians' well-being and growth. While the charlatan might value the self-serving praise of men, or the wealth that might be deceitfully gained from them, Paul values the Thessalonians themselves, as a mother values her own infants. As he expresses it in verse 19, From the image of the maternal affection and bond, Paul later progresses to one of the father in his role of preparing the child for life in the wider world.

Using both the maternal image and the paternal image that succeeds it in verse 11, Paul demonstrates the depths of his personal investment in the life, the health and the growth of the Thessalonians' and Christians. Paul's representation of his ministry in these opening chapters of Thessalonians dramatically challenges many of the assumptions that we can bring to Acts of Communication. While our understanding of the Acts of Communication can often very sharply distinguish between senders, messengers and the recipients, Paul systematically unworks each of these oppositions in relationship to the Gospel message, drawing the minds of the Thessalonian Christians back to the founding events of their church.

Paul speaks of the Gospel as God's self-communication by the Spirit, of God working through and in his messengers, of the emissary of the Gospel as one born along by the message that he bears, of the message as something that is powerfully at work in its recipients, and of the recipients as children of the message, begotten and nourished by the messenger. At each point Paul reveals that the oppositions that can serve as occasions for deceit, for perverse motives and for distrust are destabilised by the very character of the Gospel. In the Gospel there is the tightest of possible connections between the one who sends the messenger and the messenger themselves, between the

messenger and the message and the one who sends the message and the message, and then between the recipients and the ones who bring the message to them and then the messenger and the messenger.

All of these things are tightly bound together in a way that makes them inseparable. One of the most significant features of Western society today is the breakdown of public trust in various authorities, in politicians, in governments, experts, scientists, in church leaders, in journalists and the media, in constitutional documents, national principles, governmental agencies and sometimes even the very basic principles of our society themselves. And this loss of trust penetrates down to the very founding events and principles of our societies and nations, events and principles that are deemed fatally corrupted by guile, deceit, self-serving power and all these other corrupting forces.

Once we strip away the mask of our feigned values, what we find is dishonesty and untruth and attempts just to bolster power. Scandals, revelations of abuse, manifest corruption, incompetence, self-interest in office and all these sorts of things lead to growing distrust and that metastasises into more general suspicion. As the healthy movement of truth in the body of society depends upon a circulatory system of trust, the breakdown of trust will produce the crisis of truth that we currently face.

Arresting the progress of this disease is an immense challenge. Reaction against dysfunction seldom straightforwardly yields healthy functioning, after merely producing new or exacerbated problems in the place of those it once opposed. Without a clear vision and a model of genuine, forthright and trustworthy discourse, and of the sort of robust and healthful social relations that can bear the weight of truth, it can be very difficult to address such social sickness.

Yet this vision of society, marked by the strength of trust and truth, is what Paul is presenting us with in 1 Corinthians chapter 2. This is a society seen in God's entrusting of his truth to human messengers, who entrust themselves in turn to the recipients of their announcement. It is a society seen in, and revelatory of, the power of the communication of truth itself as a social bond. The genuine communication of the truth requires the communication of ourselves, reinforcing the trust that allows it to circulate.

Just as untruth and distrust can cause a society to disintegrate, so truth and the mutual trust and entrusting it produces are health to society's flesh and marrow to its bones. To those who might have accused Paul of using his message as a mask for greed, he reminds the Thessalonians of the way that he and his fellow missionaries worked tirelessly so as not to place a burden upon the converts. In Acts chapter 18 verse 3 we discover that Paul was a tentmaker, which seemed to be a way in which he supported his missionary work so as not to put a burden upon converts, and to protect himself from the false charge that he was engaged in his missionary labours for personal gain.

Paul and his fellow missionaries were marked by unimpeachable character among the

Thessalonians, and also by holy conduct. They acted towards the Thessalonians like a father with his children, exhorting, encouraging and charging in a paternal manner, if they were like nursing mothers in sharing and giving their very selves to the converts, as a woman might give her breast to her infant. They are also like fathers in their authoritative paternal guidance, their direction, their encouragement and their oversight.

The power that a father has to encourage and build up his son, to give his son confidence, was something that they showed towards the Thessalonians, along with the authoritative instruction and direction that fathers can provide. Paul renews his expression of thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' conversion at this point. This is something that confirms his ministry among them.

When they received the Gospel from Paul and his companions, they received it as a word from God, not merely as a word of men. In verse 6 of chapter 1, Paul described the Thessalonians becoming imitators of Paul and his companions and of the Lord. Here he speaks of them becoming imitators of the churches in Judea.

Much as the Judean churches were persecuted by their Jewish compatriots, so the Thessalonians were persecuted by the Gentiles around them. Jew and Gentile Christians are here united in a shared experience of suffering for Christ's name. Paul lists the sins of the Jews, which had been brought to a climax in the crucifixion of Christ, after their killing of the prophets.

They had also rejected the message of the Spirit through the church and had sought to prevent that message from being brought to the Gentiles. In the Gospels, Jesus spoke of Jerusalem filling up the full measure of its sins and full judgment falling upon that generation. Paul here describes the same thing – Jerusalem and Judea face God's wrath at last in the coming destruction of AD 70.

A question to consider. Paul closely connects the truth of the Gospel message with the guileless and trustworthy way in which it is brought by the Lord's ministers. How can we make the truth of the message of the Gospel clearer by the ways in which we present it? At the end of 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, Paul moves from discussing the Thessalonians' initial reaction to the Gospel and their relation to Paul and his fellow missionaries during their time among them.

He turns to discuss their subsequent relationship with them and their great desire to see them again. Paul and Silas had to leave Thessalonica secretly by night because of the threat from the Jews and the people and authorities that were stirred up by them. However, leaving the Thessalonians was an agonising break for Paul.

They had just received Christ joyfully through the preaching of the missionaries, who were like a nursing mother with them. Being torn away from the Thessalonians was like a mother being taken away from her newborn child. The term that Paul uses at this point

could be translated orphaned.

The Greek term here can be used not just to refer to children who have lost their parents, but also to parents who have had their children snatched from them. The Thessalonians were so young in the faith, so vulnerable, that Paul and the missionaries must have felt their departure to be incredibly agonising and heart-wrenching. Paul relates the fact that he had personally attempted on numerous occasions to return to the Thessalonians, but had been thwarted on each occasion by Satan.

On other occasions, Paul attributes his failure to return somewhere to God's preventative activity, but here he sees the hand of Satan as being involved. If the Thessalonians wondered whether Paul and his missionary companions had simply abandoned them, Paul wants to disabuse them of any such notion. While their absence from the Thessalonians was only for a short time, it was at such a critical period of the Thessalonians' spiritual development that it must have been of the greatest difficulty for Paul and his companions.

Paul expresses his joyful confidence that the Thessalonians will prove to be their victory crown at the coming of Christ. This moment will be a joyful union with the Thessalonians after their separation. It will also be a sign of the overcoming of the enemy who had tried to hold them apart.

And all of this provides the background for the explanation of the sending of Timothy that follows. Timothy had been sent to the Thessalonians. Because the missionaries could not bear their separation from them any longer, they longed to shepherd them in their vulnerable young faith.

Little though they could spare him, they sent Timothy their co-worker from Athens to encourage, to establish and to exhort the Thessalonian Christians. They were especially concerned that they would be equipped to face persecution, which the missionaries had told them was coming when they first were with them. They had taught the Thessalonians that persecution was something that Christians were destined to undergo.

Christian faith is, by its very nature, in fundamental tension with the world, so believers should expect sharp opposition and persecution. Paul also sent Timothy so that he could be assured that they were persevering in their faith, as he was deeply worried for them, lest Satan had successfully tempted them away from Christ. Paul keenly felt Satan's opposition in the situation surrounding the Thessalonians.

He recognised that they were probably experiencing satanic assaults, much as he had been hindered by Satan from going to them. Satan presumably wanted to bring the Thessalonians into bitter testing before they were ready or prepared for it, so that they might fall away as a result. However, Timothy returned with incredibly encouraging news.

The separated parties have both, through Timothy, been made aware of the others' longing to be reunited with them, and their deep affection for one another. Timothy is likely going to be returning to the Thessalonians with this letter. Worrying about the people that you love, when you know that they are in a position of danger and you haven't heard news from them, can be agonising.

It might have been even worse had the Thessalonians believed or suspected that Paul and the missionaries had just abandoned them. Paul's relief upon hearing the news from Timothy is palpable. They had sent Timothy to encourage the Thessalonians in their faith.

Now, as the news of the Thessalonians' strong faith is brought back to them, the missionaries are encouraged by the Thessalonians' faith in turn. Indeed, so important was this to Paul that he speaks of the missionaries' assurance of the faith of the Thessalonians as giving them life. We might think of the way that Jacob reacted to the news of the apparent death of Joseph, the way that he will go down to his grave in mourning, and then how he reacted when he heard that he was still alive.

It was as if he came alive too. As Jacob's heart was knit to that of his son Joseph, so the missionaries' hearts are knit to those of the Thessalonians. Paul bursts with joy and emotion, which he addresses to God in thanksgiving.

In his absence from the Thessalonians, the Thessalonians had never been absent from his prayers, and now in the news that assures them of the answer to those prayers, he overflows with a joy that exceeds his capacity to render sufficient thanksgiving, but fuels more earnest prayers that he might see them again in person and minister to their faith. They still have a very great deal to learn and be prepared for, and Paul wants to be there to provide them with the training that they so require. Much of 1 Thessalonians is devoted to correspondence of a more personal nature.

It is richly theological, but it's not the sort of teaching that we're usually expecting from a Pauline letter. Chapter 3 ends this personal correspondence by transposing the material to this point into the form of a prayer. Paul prays that God the Father and the Lord Jesus would finally make it possible for them to see the Thessalonians again.

Praying to the Father and the Son together here is evidence of Paul's high understanding of Christ. He also prays that the Lord would cause the love of the Thessalonians to increase for one another, as the missionaries' own love increases for the Thessalonians. One of the blessings of knowing God is that God can be near to our loved ones, even when we cannot be, and we can make petitions to God for them accordingly.

Finally, Paul asks the Lord that the hearts of the Thessalonians would be strengthened in blameless holiness. Their external conduct needs to be unimpeachable, and their inner selves need to be settled and secure. He alludes to Zechariah 14, verse 5, Then the Lord

my God will come and all the holy ones with him.

And he declares his hope that they will be found ready on that day, in a way that puts Jesus in the place of the Lord in the Zechariah quotation, once again suggesting the deity of Christ. A question to consider. How do you think Paul distinguished between the agency of the Lord in directing their travels and the opposition of Satan? What are some of the principles that should guide our understanding of Satan's activity in such situations in our lives? 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 begins with a finally in many translations.

Gordon Fee however suggests that it might be better translated as, As for other matters. The main purpose of this first epistle to the Thessalonians is the relationship between Paul and his companions and the Thessalonians, which occupies the significant majority of the letter. However, Paul also wishes to exhort the Thessalonians to continue in what they had been taught.

He speaks as though most of the Thessalonians were adhering to the teaching that he and his companions had instructed them in. Yet some might be diverting from it, which is why he reiterates it without rebuking the entire church or belabouring the points. Paul entreats and exhorts the Thessalonians in the Lord Jesus.

He speaks to them gently. One of the important features of apostolic rhetoric is its preference for gentle persuasion and reasoning over command, prohibition or rebuke. There are occasions when these things are appropriate, but most of the time we have persuasion and reasoning.

Such rhetoric is designed for the mature, for people who have a stronger internal grasp of what is good. By contrast, the rhetoric of the law is far more designed for people in a state of infancy and immaturity. Persuasion furnishes us with reasons for action that we can internalise and possess as our own.

Command, however, gives us external reasons for action when we are not at a point when we can internalise the reasons yet. Paul is speaking to the Thessalonians as people in Christ who have his spirit indwelling them and as mature people who can be reasoned with and persuaded and won over. He has already instructed the Thessalonians in the Lord Jesus on the matters that he is about to teach them on again, speaking to them as one with apostolic authority.

And now he takes the opportunity to repeat the instructions that he has already given them. The teaching he gives relates to a fundamental issue in how we relate to God, about God's desire for us, namely the fact that God desires our sanctification. Sanctification relates to being blameless in holiness, which Paul mentioned back in chapter 3 verse 13.

Being holy involves being set apart. And one of the aspects of this that Paul often draws attention to in his letters is holiness in sexual matters. Speaking of our bodies, or perhaps more particularly our sexual organs, as vessels, Paul maintains that we need to control our vessels in holiness and honour.

We have been devoted to the service of the Lord and we must treat our bodies accordingly. Self-control is emphasised here in contrast to the Gentiles who are ignorant of God and who act in the passion of lust, their uncontrolled desires controlling them. The categories of holiness and honour are really important and prominent ones for Pauline sexual ethics.

The categories that far exceed are more customary categories for sexual morality that can boil down to little more than consent. For instance, the concept of same-sex relations as a form of dishonouring the body is an important aspect of Paul's argument against such practices in Romans chapter 1. Paul's teaching of sexual ethics rests on a very different view of the person and he expresses this ethic most fully in 1 Corinthians chapter 6 verses 9-20. All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful.

All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything. Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

And God raised the Lord, and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For as it is written, the two will become one flesh. But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

Flee from sexual immorality! Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

As Christians, our bodies have been visibly marked out for resurrection in the seal of baptism. Our bodies are the limbs and organs of Christ. Our bodies are the temple or the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit dwells not merely within our minds or within our hearts, but in our bodies. Our bodies are the self as an object, even to ourselves. Before I have subjective awareness, before I have agency or volition, I am my body.

My body is the very root of my being. It is my place in the world. It is the thing that people relate to as me.

Our bodies, however, are marked out as holy. They are marked out as God's own. God

claims us at the very deepest part of ourselves.

Our bodies are the site of shame, of felt mortality, of weakness, of death, and many, many other things like that. We may feel exposed to the judgment of others in our bodies as their gaze falls upon us. We may feel violated by things that others have done to our bodies, or things that we have done with our bodies.

We may feel that our bodies are failing us as we age, or through forms of infirmity or disability. We may feel, for instance, wrongly stigmatized by others on account of our bodies, perhaps because of our racial or our ethnic appearance. Yet God has claimed our bodies for himself, and he will raise up these bodies on the last day.

Our bodies, being set apart for God, have great dignity and must be treated as holy accordingly. Our bodies are earthy, they're mortal, they're weak, they're ungainly, and generally somewhat unattractive. The scriptures never suggest otherwise.

The scriptures don't divinize the body. They don't pretend that the body is anything other than what it is. However, God has made these bodies a realm of his habitation, and he desires to raise them up.

He values our bodies, and he relates to us in our bodies, not just in ourselves detached from our bodies. This is why sexual ethics is such a hugely important issue for Paul. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and if your body has been set apart by the Lord, you must treat your body accordingly.

Paul particularly speaks to those who are sexually immoral, and wronging their brother in this matter. Perhaps he has in mind a man having an adulterous relationship with another man's wife. However, sexual behaviour in general is, for Paul, not something that can be privatised, as we tend to imagine.

Our bodies belong to Christ, they've been bought at a price by him, so we don't have the right to do what we wish with them. Husbands and wives must honour each other with their bodies. Whatever physical or psychological prophylactics we might employ, we cannot engage in sexual relations without acting towards another person's very self.

Beyond this, sexual holiness has implications for our neighbours. Sexual immorality in the Church compromises the whole body in Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 5, as he says, a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Sexual immorality is also something that the Lord will judge.

This is a fact which Paul and his companions had solemnly warned the Thessalonians about. To dismiss the importance of sexual holiness is to sin against God himself, who has sanctified our bodies for himself by the gift of his indwelling Spirit. God has called us for the very end of holiness, and sexual impurity runs directly contrary to God's intent in salvation.

We disregard this at our very peril. Paul concludes this section by turning to discuss the duty of love. This is something that they had already been taught by God.

Perhaps Paul has in view the new covenant promise of God's more direct teaching of his people by the Holy Spirit. This is something the Thessalonians already knew. Paul is spurring them on to act more faithfully in terms of it.

The issue that precipitates Paul's teaching seems to be the behaviour of some indigents in the community, who are selfishly taking advantage of the provision of others and living off others' generosity when they could and should be providing for themselves. Acting in such a manner is unloving to others and dishonours the Church before outsiders. It is an honourable thing to live in a way that is provident and not dependent.

We should aspire to live quiet lives that aren't disruptive, concerning ourselves with our own affairs, working with our own hands in our own labours, and seeking to be as self-sufficient as possible. People who don't live in such a manner are disruptive, they get into other people's business, they make themselves a nuisance and a burden in their communities and prevent their communities from doing things that they could do otherwise. When we live in an appropriate manner, however, we will not selfishly make ourselves a burden upon others and we will also be able to serve people ourselves much more readily.

Living in such a manner will also be respectable in the eyes of the world around, which besides improving the Church's witness is a good thing in itself, as it manifests the holiness to which we have been called. A question to consider. What are some ways in which the aspiration to self-sufficiency is important for the practice of love? In the second half of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 we arrive at some of the main teaching of the letter.

As Gordon Fee observes, there are suggestions that this teaching, or at least aspects of it, is being received by the Thessalonians for the first time. Paul doesn't use the language of reminder, or suggests that they do not need further teaching, as he does in chapter 5 verse 1. Rather, his concern is that they are not uninformed. The matter in question concerns the resurrection of the dead in Christ.

It is possible that the Thessalonians interpreted their present sufferings as the sufferings leading up to Christ's coming. Indeed, Christ would come in judgment in Jerusalem in AD 70 and establish his kingdom to a new degree. However, the death of some members of the Church before this time would clearly be a cause of great distress and uncertainty for the Thessalonians.

The expectation of the near return of Christ, in some manner, might provoke these concerns on the part of the Thessalonians. Although there doesn't seem to be desperate anticipation, and expectation of the full eschatological reality dawning in that moment in

time, they are awaiting something, and they are uncertain of how to relate to the deaths of some of their members before that time comes. Now, AD 70 clearly did not realise the hope of the future resurrection of the dead in Christ.

Anyone who would have placed all of their eschatological hopes on that event would have found themselves sorely disappointed, despite the great significance of the event. In Scripture, there are anticipations of final judgment in the middle of history. In these events, the great and final horizon comes into view, often in a way that relates it directly to events on the nearer horizon.

We could perhaps compare this to the way that looking out from an elevated vantage point, distinct mountain ranges, many miles divided from each other, can seem to be as one. In like manner, more imminent fulfilments of prophecy confuse on the horizon with more distant ones. This isn't just a misperception.

Earlier deliverances in history actually foreshadow later ones. And if we think that the fulfilment of a prophecy entirely terminates on its most immediate referent, we will often not only be disappointed, but be under-reading the text. The Exodus, for instance, foreshadows later and greater exoduses.

It foreshadows the return from exile in the time of the prophets. But the force of the prophecies concerning a new exodus do not exhaust themselves in the return from exile. They also await the death and resurrection of Christ.

And then they also await AD 70, and the final coming. The New Testament often interprets Old Testament prophecies in this way, recognising that several successive mountain ranges of fulfilment can be present in the horizon of a single prophecy. That single prophecy may refer to a more immediate event, but it refers to it in a way that does not give full resolution of this prophetic force in that coming event, but awaits further events beyond that for its fuller fulfilment.

The fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus in his body is a basis for belief in the resurrection of those who fall asleep in Christ. Jesus is the first fruits of those who have died. His resurrection assures us of ours.

Our bodies are connected with his by the Spirit. And in the rite of baptism, that fact is sealed to us. It is only in the light of the awakening of the resurrection that death can be spoken of as an event of falling asleep.

It's truly remarkable to think about our death as a falling asleep, but as we know that we will one day be woken up, it is appropriate to do so. For this reason, we do not grieve as those without hope. We still grieve, but we grieve as people who have hope and expectation of a final resurrection.

Paul gives them a word of Christ himself. He might have received this teaching from

those who had witnessed Jesus during his ministry, or he may be referring to something he received by a special revelation. The teaching that Paul gives comes directly from Christ himself then.

Death does not disadvantage those who die before the coming of Christ. Rather, the resurrection will be a reunion of the dead and those still alive. Paul describes, on the basis of the Lord's own teaching, the coming of the Lord in a way that reminds us of Old Testament events.

For instance, Exodus 19, verses 16-20. We might also think of passages such as Psalm 47, verse 5. God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Jesus also has taught concerning this event, in John 5, verses 25-29 for instance.

In that passage, Jesus connects two sorts of resurrection events. The raising of people from spiritual death with the word, and the final resurrection by the summons of Christ. And such a passage, I believe, helps us to understand the way that events can become fused on the eschatological horizon.

When you read the word of Christ, you are not just talking about the resurrection of the dead, When you read, an hour is coming, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live, you think, this is the final resurrection. But then, as part of that, I've missed out some words. And is now here.

There is something already happening that is bringing this event to pass. And that event is not actually the final resurrection. It's an anticipation of it.

And there's a future hour coming that Jesus also speaks about. And so the initial referent of these words is one that anticipates a greater fulfilment at some point in the future. The trumpet call is associated with the year of Jubilee.

It is also associated with the return from exile, or with deliverance. See, for instance, Isaiah chapter 27, verse 13. And in Zechariah chapter 9, verses 14 to 16.

We might also think of the way that the coming of Christ in judgment in AD 70 is described. In Matthew chapter 24, verses 30 to 31. Now if this sounds like the last coming of Christ, the final judgment, and the resurrection of all to us, we could clearly be excused.

It certainly does sound like that. Yet in the context, it can only refer to an event that occurs within the generation that that prophecy is given. And as we look back in the Old Testament, we can see similar language being used of events that were fulfilled in known history.

So it's clearly not the final judgment. But yet it does anticipate the final judgment. It's described in a way that is so powerful and charged with cosmic import that it seems to

demand something more than just the destruction of AD 70 for its fulfillment.

Now the initial fulfillment is the destruction of AD 70. But the horizon that we are seeing there expands to include the greater horizon of the end of all things. The coming of Christ in the clouds is also related to the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds in Daniel chapter 7, verses 13 to 14.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the ancient days, and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

This is also reminiscent of Jesus' own ascension in Acts chapter 1, verses 9 to 11. And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

The final resurrection involves a participation in Christ's own ascended rule. It doesn't say that we are caught up to heaven. Rather, there is a meeting of ascending earth and descending heaven in the air.

Heaven and earth are united. Revelation chapter 21, verses 1 to 4 speaks of this. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. The Thessalonians are charged to encourage each other with these promises, which is exactly what we should be doing on a regular basis.

Paul then addresses them concerning times and seasons, about which they had already been taught. The day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night. It's a robbery, it's a disruption of people's false sense of peace and security.

It takes from them all the things that they have invested their life in. It's something that snatches people away. One is taken, the other is left.

It is described as a sort of pain that can come upon them, like labour pangs for a pregnant woman. There is a new age about to be born, and this new birth will occur through birth pangs, through pain and suffering and tribulation. And people must be prepared for that, so that it does not come upon them suddenly and unexpectedly.

Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that they are the children of the day. The day that is coming is our day. It is the day of the Lord, and we are the people of the Lord.

As a result, we are wakeful people, not sleeping in the insensitivity of sin and dissipation. We are sober people, not people who are drunk and people who have lost their senses. We keep our wits about us.

In sobriety and alertness, we await our deliverance. We await the coming day, the day that belongs to us and the day to which we belong. We are children of the light.

As children of the light, we bring something of the light of this coming dawn, this coming day, in the way that we behave. We are as light in a dark place, as we bear the light of Christ within us, and we testify to the coming dawn that he will bring. Seeing us, people should know what to expect.

On the basis of our belonging to the day, Paul teaches us that we must be sober. And then he offers a military and perhaps also a priestly image. We put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation.

This might be related to the clothes of the high priest. It's also the military garment that someone would wear going into battle. God himself dresses in such a way to act on behalf of his people.

In Isaiah chapter 59 verse 17, he puts on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head. He put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. Just as we are light in the world, reflecting the fact that God himself is light, so we are those who dress for battle, as our Lord dresses for battle, to bring salvation for his people.

We are the army that will be joined with him on that great day, caught up in that summons to meet him in the air. God has destined us to receive salvation on the coming day. We can take great assurance in this fact.

It is his purpose that we make it through tribulation, that we end up joined with him and the saints raised up, celebrating in joyful military assembly the return of his son. The future reality of this day, this dawning that we are waiting for, is something that governs all of our life here and now. It's the orienting reality of the entirety of our existence.

As a result, we must always be building up and encouraging each other, always directing each other to this coming day. This is what we're waiting for. This is what we're about.

We should also observe that the way that we are dressed is one that integrates the three core Christian virtues, faith, hope and love. These are the things that will prepare us for that day. These are the things that will help us to stand firm here and now, so that we are both ready for, anticipating and reflecting the reality of that day that is to come.

A question to consider, what are some ways in which we can follow Paul's instruction here and be encouraging each other even more than we do with the light of the coming day of the Lord's return? The conclusion of 1 Thessalonians is mostly a punchy series of final instructions. Paul begins by exhorting the Thessalonians to respect their leaders, not just to submit to them, but to honour them and the labour that they perform, and to hold them in the highest loving regard. They labour among them, they care for them in the Lord, and they admonish them.

Paul's primary reference here is not to ministers so much as ministries. The people in question are probably not all ordained guardians of the church either. Paul probably has the women who labour in the life of the church no less in mind than the male pastoral guardians.

Romans chapter 16 might give us more of an idea of the sort of group of which he is thinking. The task of the leaders of the church is primarily that of caring for those committed to their oversight. They must protect them from error, they must build them up in the truth, they must unite them in fellowship, and take concern for their needs both spiritual and material.

Earlier in this letter we saw the way that Paul challenges the way that we can set sender, messenger, message and recipients over against each other, as detached and sometimes in opposition. In Christ and the gospel, these things are bound together. The messenger of the gospel, for instance, gives himself to those to whom he delivers the message, and he becomes a form of the message himself, as do those who receive it.

Here Paul also challenges some of the ways that we can instinctively regard the relationship between those in authority and those under authority. Rather than chafing at their authority, we are to be thankful for the care that they show, to recognise authority as a good thing, that, far from weakening us, can make us stronger. Leaders in the church are not a special higher class of persons.

They are our brothers, and we need to esteem them highly and love. We do this not so much because of the mere authority vested in their positions, but because we recognise the goodness and the value of the work that they do among us. The emphasis is very much on what they do over the offices that they do or do not hold.

We submit in love, wishing their labours among us to be fruitful, much as we recognise that they desire that we are fruitful. The Thessalonians are charged to be at peace among themselves. God has brought us into peace by the sacrifice of his Son, and we

must inhabit this peace together.

Paul gives a series of rapid-fire imperatives to the Thessalonians. The initial imperatives - admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all - might seem to relate especially to the work of those in leadership. However, they are also the responsibility of everyone else.

The leaders lead the way in the work of the entire body. Paul returns to the concern he raised earlier in chapter 4 verses 11-12 about idle members of the community who are sponging off others. They should be admonished and taught to be self-sufficient.

Those whose hearts were failing them were to be encouraged. How? Probably by focusing on the future coming of Christ. In chapter 4 verse 18 and chapter 5 verse 11, Paul had already charged them to encourage each other in this manner.

The weak must be assisted as they have their need. The vision here is of a congregation in which people and their leaders are very attentive to each other, recognising and ministering to the various needs of people in different situations. They are instructed to show patience with all.

Patience is one virtue whose absence makes it difficult to practice any of the others. People are difficult. They can be resistant to correction, they can be unresponsive to encouragement, and our efforts to help them can often seem futile and fruitless.

It is only with a loving patience that we will persevere with them. Without patience, community is almost impossible. The Thessalonians then must minister to and nurture each other in these ways.

The Thessalonians are warned against repaying evil for evil. Christians must reject the way of retribution, perhaps particularly important for a church that is undergoing forms of persecution. They must seek to do good.

They don't merely refrain from evil, but positively seek out creative and appropriate ways in which they can do good. We might be reminded of Jesus' teaching concerning the fulfilment of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. The law is fulfilled in proactive and transformative love, not in mere sin avoidance.

Paul's instructions here are similar in form to those that we find in places such as Romans 12, verses 9-18. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another.

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay

no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Reading Paul's staccato list, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances here, we might recall the ways that he has already exemplified these practices in this letter, in his own way of behaviour. For instance, chapter 1, verse 2, We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.

Always, for all of you, constantly. And chapter 3, verses 9-10, For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith. All of these charges involve a call to consistency.

Always, without ceasing, in all circumstances. As we are people determined by realities, principles and truths deeper than our situations, we won't waver in the same way as others do. The final imperatives could arguably be said to focus on the Spirit and on His work.

The Spirit is the animating flame of God's presence within us, and we must fan this flame to greater life and not quench it. The Thessalonians must live holy lives as temples of the Holy Spirit. They need to value the words of prophets, testing what they say, discerning and holding fast what is good, and discerning and rejecting all forms of evil.

And doing this would equip the Thessalonians in their future growth. The chapter and the epistle ends with a benediction, a brief encouragement, some brief exhortations and a concluding benediction. Paul began the letter with grace and peace, and now he ends it with them.

He directs the Thessalonians' attention once more to the much-awaited day of the Lord's coming, and now calls for God to establish them in the blamelessness of holiness to which they are called. God's faithfulness is the grounds of our hope in this regard. He will bring to completion what he has started in us.

He began with prayers for the Thessalonians, and now he asks the Thessalonians to pray for him and his missionary companions. They are also instructed to greet each other with a holy kiss, as a sign of close familial affection, and to have the letter read aloud to the entire congregation. A question to consider.

Why does Paul so often emphasize constancy in rejoicing? Thank you for listening.